

**Sally Forth:**  
**An Analytical Study of the Experiences of the**  
**Pioneering Women in the Reform Rabbinate, 1972-1981**

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Dedicated to

**Sally S. Huebscher**  
**Robert K. Huebscher**



*My parents, who encourage me to sally forth.*

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Finally, I would like to thank all of the women who have become rabbis and those that will become rabbis. Please continue to share your stories.

Digest

This thesis serves to explore the experience of nineteen of the first women to be ordained as rabbis by the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion. Among the topics explored in this thesis are the cultural climate that allowed women to emerge in the rabbinate, individuals, organizations, and events supported or discouraged the pioneering women in the rabbinate, how the first American Reform female rabbis fashioned their rabbinates, the role that physical image played in the rabbinates of the earliest reform women rabbis, the understanding of feminism among the pioneering women in the rabbinate, the expectations placed on these rabbis, and changes to the rabbinate and American Reform Judaism influenced by these rabbis. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to collect and analyze the perceptions of the earliest American Reform women rabbis on the subject of their self-identification and experience as rabbis, and to present conclusions based on these findings.

## **Sally Forth: An Analytical Study of The Experiences of the Pioneering Women in the Reform Rabbinate**

### Introduction

The women ordained as rabbis at the Hebrew Union College between 1972 and 1981 were pioneers in that they faced unique challenges throughout their professional lives, represented their gender in the societies of rabbis, and were confronted with expectations and generalizations about their place on the *bima*. The experience of these women was unlike those of previous generations when women such as Martha Neumark, Dr. Dora Askowith, and Regina Jonas, struggled to gain access to a rabbinical education.<sup>1</sup> Rather, the women ordained between 1972 and 1981 navigated the challenges of integrating women into a rabbinate that would be both male and female. Women rabbis were faced with the challenge of representing women, diversifying the physical image of the rabbi, and changing the language used in worship, teaching, and conversation. Ultimately, these women helped bring about changes to the rabbinate as a whole, including liturgical reform, parental leave, awareness of issues pertaining to women, and a redefinition of success in the rabbinate.

### Context of Research

For almost forty years, liberal rabbinical seminaries have been ordaining women rabbis. The vast majority of these women have been ordained at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC), or the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS). Women rabbis have served the Jewish community in a variety of posts throughout North America, and each one has

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<sup>1</sup> For a longer account of the experiences of these trailblazers, see Pamela Nadell, *Women Who Would Be Rabbis: A History of Women's Ordination, 1889-1985*. (Boston: Beacon Press. 1998.)

had a unique career. Women now constitute a majority in the rabbinical classes ordained by the Reform and Reconstructionist movements. They hold positions of leadership in these movements. Women serve congregations and communities around the country and around the world.

The American Reform movement has long sought to recognize the value of women's contributions to Judaism. A resolution adopted by the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) in 1893 states: "We have progressed beyond the idea of the secondary position of women in Jewish congregations; we recognize the importance of their hearty cooperation and active participation in congregational affairs."<sup>2</sup> Throughout the history of progressive Judaism, women have taken leadership positions and demonstrated their importance to synagogue life. It was not until 1972, however, that the first woman was ordained. As historian Pamela Nadell pointed out, "It took nearly a century to negotiate the path from the rising expectations for women in the rabbinate to the first of the women who became Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative rabbis."<sup>3</sup>

In 1972 the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati (Reform), ordained the first woman in America, Sally Priesand. Two years later, in 1974, Sandy Sasso was ordained by the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia, and in 1985, Amy Eilberg was ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York (Conservative). The history of how these three women became the first to receive ordination from their respective seminaries is well documented in Nadell's work. To date, however, the individual stories of the subsequent pioneering women who actually entered the rabbinate and established rabbinical careers for themselves have not been gathered and studied.

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<sup>2</sup> CCAR Yearbook, 1983. Cincinnati: Bloch Publishing. Page 40.

<sup>3</sup> Nadell, 219.

Aside from Nadell's work, there have been several scholarly articles detailing the experience of women in Reform Judaism and the ordination of women rabbis. Significant works include Karla Goldman's book, *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery: Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism*, which discusses the role and expectations of women in early American Judaism and the historical developments which brought women into synagogue life in an active way.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus' work, *The American Jewish Woman, 1654-1980*, discusses, at length, the influential events and people in the emergence of the American Jewess, including an analysis of organizations built by Jewish women and movements supported by American Jewish women.<sup>5</sup> Dr. Gary Phillip Zola's collection: *Women Rabbis: Exploration and Celebration: Papers Delivered at an Academic Conference Honoring Twenty Years of Women in the Rabbinate, 1972-1992*, provides perspectives on the ordination of women from leaders in the Reform movement, including historical, contemporary, and forward-thinking views.<sup>6</sup>

### Research Questions

This thesis is designed to provide an analysis of oral histories collected from the pioneering women in the rabbinate. Data for this thesis was collected through phone interviews with rabbis who volunteered to be recorded after being contacted by e-mail. The questions focused on how these rabbis fashioned their rabbinic image and expressed their understanding of feminism and womanhood in the rabbinate. While the questions were occasionally adjusted for individual rabbis, the majority of those interviewed were asked the same or similar questions.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 2000.

<sup>5</sup> New York: Ktav Publishing House. 1981.

<sup>6</sup> Cincinnati: HUC-JIR Rabbinic Alumni Association Press. 1996.

<sup>7</sup> A comprehensive list of questions can be found in Appendix A.

As an introductory question, rabbis were asked about their decision to become a rabbi. Some rabbis shared only the events directly leading to this decision, while others spoke about a more comprehensive journey to the rabbinate. Next, rabbis were asked questions regarding their views of feminism and femininity. They were asked if they considered themselves feminists and how they defined the term. They were also given the opportunity to describe ritual and liturgical innovation related to women. Additionally, the rabbis were asked to describe changes that they perceived in the rabbinate at the time of women's emergence in the rabbinate and the degree to which women affected these changes.

The next set of questions focused on the superficial physical image of the rabbi, including body image, hairstyle, clothing, and other fashion concerns. Influenced by Joy Levitt's article, "Women Rabbis: A Pyrrhic Victory?" in which she described two models for women in the rabbinate: Navy Blue Suit, a rabbi who saw herself as the same as a male, and the Goddess, a rabbi who saw herself as the absolute opposite of a male, the rabbis were asked where on that continuum they would place themselves.<sup>8</sup> The women also responded to questions regarding challenges fashioning their rabbinic image, comments they received on their attire, and the decisions they made regarding their physical image.

Finally, the rabbis were asked questions about the realities they faced as pioneers in their profession. They were asked about their greatest successes and challenges in the rabbinate and the effect they perceived their gender to have on those successes and

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<sup>8</sup> Joy Levitt, "Women Rabbis: A Pyrrhic Victory?" in *Contemporary American Issues*. January-February, 1985. P. 21.

challenges. The rabbis were asked to reflect on the personal qualities that enabled them to succeed in the rabbinate and the advice they could give to future rabbis.

In an effort to obtain answers that reflected an unbiased perspective, I attempted to keep questions neutral and non-leading. From their responses I believe we can gain important perspectives on a variety of issues that confronted these pioneering rabbis and on their contribution to the American Jewish experience.

### Significance of the Question

This research is significant because it collects the stories of women rabbis in their own voices and preserves them for future generations to hear. As Nadell has noted, “The history of the debate on women . . . poses a project for the future, for others who need to climb on the shoulders of those who preceded them to create their own revolutions.”<sup>9</sup>

This is an important observation, and since many of the women who entered the rabbinate during the 1970s and early 1980s are now approaching the age of retirement, and it is vitally important that steps be taken to preserve their memories and, in so doing, to reconstruct the early history of women in the rabbinate:

The gerontologist Robert Butler has postulated that all people, as they grow older and perceive that they are approaching death,<sup>10</sup> undergo a mental process of life review accounting for depression and despair in some, and for candor, serenity, and wisdom in others. The past “marches in review,” permitting the [interviewees] to survey and reflect, especially on moments of unresolved conflict.<sup>11</sup>

Butler’s observation suggests that as women rabbis approach the conclusion of their years in the active rabbinate, they will be in a position to reflect more expansively on how their careers unfolded. This being the case, the time is ripe to harvest these reflections.

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<sup>9</sup> Nadell, 220.

<sup>10</sup> This claim does not reflect a sense that the pioneering women in the rabbinate are approaching death.

<sup>11</sup> Donald A Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), P. 31.

### Findings

Reflecting on the past enables leaders to shape the future. The emergence of women in the Reform rabbinate fundamentally changed how outsiders would view rabbis, how rabbis would look and speak, and the choices that would be made available to rabbis in their professional lives. How these women now reflect on the experiences that led to these changes can enable a greater understanding of issues from gender in the rabbinate to how to affect change within a religious movement.

The recorded histories of the pioneering women in the rabbinate provide us with a sharper perspective on the many ways in which women have influenced the growth and development of the American Reform rabbinate during the last quarter of the twentieth century. This thesis will shed light on how women rabbis ordained by the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion between 1972-1981 perceive their experience in the rabbinate, how they have changed the timbre of liturgy and ritual, and how they understand their impact on the American Reform Judaism.

### Rabbis Interviewed for this Thesis

**Rabbi Susan Abramson**, (1981) is rabbi of Temple Shalom Emeth, in Burlington, MA. She has served that congregation since 1984, and is the longest serving female rabbi in Massachusetts. She is a graduate of Brandeis University and Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion. She received her Doctor of Divinity from Hebrew Union College in 2006.<sup>12</sup>

**Rabbi Melanie W. Aron**, (1981) has served Congregation Shir Hadash of Los Gatos since July 1990. Having received her ordination from the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 1981, Rabbi Aron served congregations in Morristown, New Jersey and Brooklyn, New York before moving to California. Rabbi Aron has served on

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<sup>12</sup> [www.rabbirocketpower.com/authors.htm](http://www.rabbirocketpower.com/authors.htm) 4/22/10

the national board of the Union for Reform Judaism as the representative of the Central Conference of American Rabbis and as chair of the Committee on Adult Jewish Learning and as Chair of the Pacific Central West region of the World Union for Progressive Judaism / Association of Reform Zionists of America.<sup>13</sup>

**Rabbi Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus**, (1979) has served as the rabbi of the merged B'nai Yehuda - Beth Sholom in Homewood, Illinois since 1998. From 1987 to 1998, she was the rabbi of Congregation Beth Sholom in Park Forest, Illinois. Rabbi Dreyfus worked as a hospital chaplain at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and at Doctors Hospital in New York City. She was the Educational Coordinator at Temple Emanu-El in Oak Park, Michigan, and served for two years as the rabbi of Temple B'nai Israel in Kankakee, Illinois.<sup>14</sup>

**Rabbi Cathy L. Felix**, (1980 ) served as the rabbi of Temple Beth El in Spring Valley, held pulpit in Massachusetts, and congregations in New Jersey after having been the first Pembroke Chaplain at Brown University. Rabbi Felix helped establish the Cooperative Jewish Council in the southern suburbs of Chicago, which encouraged cooperation among organization that could benefit from shared programs.<sup>15</sup>

**Rabbi Helene Ferris**, (1981) is Rabbi Emeritus having served 14 years at Temple Israel of Northern Westchester. Prior to that time, Rabbi Ferris served as the Associate Rabbi of Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York City. Among many firsts, Rabbi Ferris was the first woman to read from a Torah scroll at Jerusalem's Kotel and has been active with Women of the Wall.<sup>16</sup>

**Rabbi Karen L. Fox**, (1978) has served Wilshire Boulevard Temple after working as the Director of Camp Hess Kramer. Rabbi Fox holds a Doctor of Divinity and is a licensed Marriage and Family Psychotherapist. She coauthored Seasons for Celebration, a guide to

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<sup>13</sup> [http://catalog.lehrhaus.org/by\\_faculty/rabbi-melanie-aron/](http://catalog.lehrhaus.org/by_faculty/rabbi-melanie-aron/) 4/22/10

<sup>14</sup> <http://huc.edu/newspubs/pressroom/article.php?pressroomid=397> 4/22/10

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.thejsc.com/rabbi\\_cathy.htm](http://www.thejsc.com/rabbi_cathy.htm) 4/22/10

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.tinw.org/who\\_we\\_are/index.php?page=734](http://www.tinw.org/who_we_are/index.php?page=734) 4/22/10

Jewish holidays and has served on the Board of CCAR and as a member of their Ethics Committee. Rabbi Fox is member of the Rabbinic Committee of Israel Bonds.<sup>17</sup>

**Rabbi Joan S. Friedman**, (1980) serves as Rabbi and Assistant Professor of History and Religious Studies at the College of Wooster in Wooster, OH. She has served as chaplain and Hillel advisor at the University of Pennsylvania, Colgate University, and Carleton College. She has a Ph.D. in Jewish history from Columbia University and was ordained by HUC-JIR in 1980.<sup>18</sup>

**Rabbi Elyse D. Frishman**, (1981) serves as rabbi of Barnet Temple in Franklin Lakes, NY. Rabbi Frishman is the editor of the Reform movement's new prayerbook, *Mishkan T'filah*, which is used by many Reform congregations.

**Rabbi Laura J. Geller**, (1976) serves as the Senior Rabbi of Temple Emanuel in Beverly Hills, California. She graduated from Brown University in 1971. Geller was the first woman to birth a child while serving in the active rabbinate and the first woman to be selected to lead a major metropolitan synagogue. Geller also served as the Executive Director of the American Jewish Congress, Pacific Southwest Region.<sup>19</sup>

**Rabbi Rosalind A. Gold**, (1978) is Rabbi Emerita of Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation in Reston, VA, having served 23 years. Gold earned her Bachelor's Degree from the University of California at Los Angeles in 1972 and was ordained by HUC-JIR in 1978. She earned her Doctor of Ministry degree from Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC in 2001, and was awarded the Doctor of Divinity degree from HUC-JIR in 2003.<sup>20</sup>

**Rabbi Debra Hachen**, (1980) serves as rabbi of Temple Beth El of Northern Valley in New Jersey. Rabbi Hachen previously served Congregation B'nai Shalom in

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.wilshireboulevardtemple.org/personnel/clergy/2> 4/22/10

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.wooster.edu/en/Student-Life/Religious-and-Spiritual-Life/Faculty-and-Staff/Rabbi-Dr-Joan-Friedman> 4/22/10

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.tebh.org/about/clergy.php> 4/22/10

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.nvhcreston.org/?q=node/1302> 4/22/10

Westborough, Massachusetts for 24 years. She also serves on the Reform movement's Joint Commission on Outreach and Synagogue Community.<sup>21</sup>

**Rabbi Leah Kroll**, (1981) lives in Israel and works at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem teaching pedagogy and designing school curricula. She received her Bachelor's degree at the University of California, Santa Cruz, her Master's degree in Hebrew Letters from the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 1978, and her rabbinic ordination in 1981. In 1998, Kroll earned a second Master's degree at Pepperdine University in Education with a specialty in Teaching as a Profession.<sup>22</sup>

**Rabbi Ellen Jay Lewis**, (1980) is a therapist in private practice in Bernardsville, New Jersey, and Manhattan. She received her analytical training in New York at the Center for Modern Psychoanalytic Studies and presently serves on the faculty of the Academy of Clinical and Applied Psychoanalysis. Lewis is certified as a Fellow in the American Association of Pastoral Counselors. She received ordination from HUC-JIR in 1980.<sup>23</sup>

**Rabbi Janet Ross Marder**, (1979) graduated from the University of California at Santa Cruz and was ordained in 1979 by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York. Following ordination, she pursued graduate studies in the Department of Comparative Literature at UCLA, specializing in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish.<sup>24</sup>

**Rabbi Mindy Avra Portnoy**, (1980) graduated cum laude from Yale University in 1973 and was ordained by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 1980. Portnoy she received numerous academic awards in the areas of homiletics, Jewish history, and religious thought. Portnoy currently serves as rabbi of Temple Sinai in Washington, DC.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> <http://tbenv.org/absolutenm/anmviewer.asp?a=626&z=14> 4/22/10

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.spoke.com/info/pF2rPnI/RabbiKroll> 4/22/10

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.rabbiellenlewis.com/> 4/22/10

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.betham.org/staff.html> 4/22/10

<sup>25</sup> <http://templesinaidc.org/about/clergystaff/> 4/22/10

**Rabbi Sally J. Priesand**, (1972) was the first woman ordained by Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. She received her ordination from Dr. Alfred Gottschalk in 1972. Priesand served as rabbi at Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York City, Temple Beth El in Elizabeth, New Jersey, and Monmouth Reform Temple in Tinton Falls, New Jersey. Priesand has served on the board of each of the major institutions of Reform Judaism: the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Union for Reform Judaism, and the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.<sup>26</sup>

**Rabbi Deborah Prinz**, (1978) was ordained by HUC-JIR in 1978. Prinz served as rabbi of Congregation Beth Am in Teaneck, New Jersey, as assistant rabbi at Central Synagogue, New York, NY, and as rabbi at Temple Adat Shalom, Poway, California. Prinz was a founder of the Women's Rabbinic Network, and President of the Pacific Association of Reform Rabbis.<sup>27</sup>

**Rabbi Myra Soifer**, (1978) attended Lawrence University in Appleton, WI, and earned her MA in Hebrew Letters at HUC-JIR 1977 rabbinic ordination in 1978. She served as student rabbi at the Jewish Community Center in Union City, TN, and at Temple Beth Shalom in Charlotte, NC. She served as assistant rabbi in New Orleans and as rabbi of Temple Sinai in Reno, NV.<sup>28</sup>

**Rabbi Susan Talve**, (1981) is the founding rabbi of Central Reform Congregation, in St. Louis, MO. Talve earned a MA in Hebrew Letters and was ordained by Hebrew Union College in 1981. Talve was honored with the college's Stephen Levinson Award for Community Service after founding the Jewish Early Learning Cooperative, Ohio's first licensed infant childcare program in the workplace.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> [http://jwa.org/feminism/\\_html/JWA059.htm](http://jwa.org/feminism/_html/JWA059.htm) 4/22/10

<sup>27</sup> [http://ccarnet.org/aboutus/deborah\\_prinz/](http://ccarnet.org/aboutus/deborah_prinz/) 4/22/10

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.rgj.com/article/20090419/LIV/904190329/Reno%5C-s-first-woman-rabbi-retires> 4/22/10

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.centralreform.org/a-rabbis.html> 4/22/10

### Chapter Breakdown

The first chapter of this thesis will explain the emergence of women in the rabbinate in its historical context. It will provide a brief history of women in the rabbinate, and an explanation of factors which allowed for the emergence of women in the rabbinate. It will summarize the notable events and influential people that contributed to the experience of the pioneering women rabbis and provide short introductions to each of the pioneering rabbis interviewed for this thesis.

The second chapter of this thesis will discuss the experiences of women rabbis related to their physical image. It will demonstrate the importance of fashion choices in shaping the rabbinate, describe how the image of the woman rabbi is portrayed in fiction, and share the experiences of pioneering rabbis regarding rabbinic image. Here, it will discuss the phenomenon of people “coming to see what women rabbis looked like,” the desire among female rabbis not to look like male rabbis, and congregational comments regarding the appearance of rabbis. Finally, it will draw conclusions about impact of women on the image of a rabbi, specifically relating to the widening spectrum of acceptable and expected rabbinic appearance.

The third chapter will discuss the role of feminism and femininity in the rabbinates of the pioneering women. It will share a brief history of feminism in Judaism, an explanation of the term “feminism” and attempt to situate it within its cultural context, and provide the varied definitions of feminism understood by women in the rabbinate. It will explain that while all of the women claimed to be feminists, they defined the term quite differently, as seen in the following categories: women’s rights, equality, achievement, and changing gender expectations. It will share the perceived pressures of

the pioneering women in the rabbinate, including representing all women and understanding the stereotype of the woman rabbi.

Chapter four will present an overview of changes in the rabbinate that occurred at the time of the emergence of women in the rabbinate including liturgical change, parental leave, and awareness of women's issues. It will demonstrate that one of the greatest changes brought about by the emergence of women in the rabbinate was a redefinition of career success from one based on the size of a rabbi's congregation to one based on the qualities of an individual's rabbinate, such as longevity, impact on individuals, transforming congregations, and teaching Torah.

The appendices of this thesis include the list of questions used for interviews, a list of women ordained by HUC-JIR divided by class year, and the transcripts of the interviews conducted for this thesis.

## **CHAPTER ONE: Historical Context for the Emergence of Women in the Reform Rabbinate**

### Introduction

The experiences of the pioneering women in the rabbinate represent the history of a unique phenomenon wherein one of the most highly regarded professions in Judaism, the rabbinate, became a possible career choice for half on the world's Jews, for whom it was not previously an option. The integration of women in the rabbinate was not a case, as Rabbi Ellen Sue Levi Elwell and Rebecca T. Alpert wrote, of "add women and stir," but rather a process of understanding and integration.<sup>30</sup> The context for this integration can be found by understanding the changing societal views of women and the empowerment of women during this time period.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a context for the emergence of women in the rabbinate based on published and documented material. In this chapter, I will first explain the changing cultural and societal conditions that existed in the 1950-70s, such as the rise of the civil rights movement, the invention of oral contraceptives, and new literature published by and for women were among the factors that made it possible for women to enter the rabbinate. Second, I will summarize, from documented literature, the individuals, events, and organizations that were crucial to the emergence of women in the rabbinate, including Rabbi Neil Kominsky and the Women's Rabbinic Network. Finally, I will provide a brief biography of the women interviewed for this thesis.

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<sup>30</sup> Ellen Sue Levi Elwell and Shirley Idelson, *Lesbian Rabbis: The First Generation*. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press. 2001), P. 14

### Changing Cultural and Societal Conditions

The factors leading to the ordination of women were manifold. Those factors which were intrinsic to Judaism - the changing religious atmosphere, the scientific study of Judaism, and the ideologies of the founders of Reform Judaism – have all been documented in Nadell’s history of women’s ordination.<sup>31</sup> These, however, are not the only factors that enabled the ordination and acceptance of women rabbis. Civil rights, the invention of oral contraceptives, and new literature published by and for women all were factors in the emergence of women in the rabbinate.

Prior to the 1960s, examples of women entering the professional world are sparse but not absent:

Remarkable women might, on occasion, merge marriage, motherhood, and work, or carve out a career for themselves in traditionally male occupations. But women who worked as doctors, architects, and politicians were always the rare exceptions, never the precursors of change. They were depicted in the media as strange mutations – ‘female physician’ or ‘lawyer and grandmother’ – whose achievements could never be mentioned except in the context of their femaleness.<sup>32</sup>

As with Nadell’s “women who would be rabbis,” these women were valiant forerunners who planted the seeds of change but were few and far between in the vast world of male professionals. The acceptance of women into the mainstream work force did not occur until a number of key elements were in place:

### Civil Rights

The civil rights movement changed the conversation of equality. Historian Gail Collins noted that the achievements of women could not have been gained had it not been

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<sup>31</sup> Pamela Nadell, *Women Who Would Be Rabbis: A History of Women’s Ordination, 1889-1985* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998)

<sup>32</sup> Gail Collins, *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2009) P. 6

for the civil rights movement. It began with the rights of African Americans and grew into a discussion of fundamental rights and universal freedoms, not only for groups persecuted because of their race, but those treated as inferior because of their gender:

The civil rights battles of the 1960s went to the core of the nation's identity, forcing the country to grapple with the fact that it had never lived up to the standards it set for itself in the Declaration of Independence. White Americans who accepted the message of what had happened when through a moral shock, made all the worse for the realization that they and their leaders had not been all that eager to rectify the injustice when it was driven home to them. As a result, young people became more skeptical about the wisdom of traditional cultural ruled. Americans grew extremely sensitive to questions of fairness, and that opened the way for other discriminated-against groups, including women, to demand their rights.<sup>33</sup>

Women had been responsible for many of the logistical elements of organizing the fight for civil rights, from coordinating volunteers to organizing grassroots groups, but men seemed to take center stage at rallies and marches. Those women who had risked their lives and their families for the cause felt as though their contributions were not respected as fully as those of men:

In the fall of 1964... [the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee]'s regular members held a gathering at Waveland, Mississippi, to regroup. Sandra 'Casey' Hayden, a longtime white organizer from Texas, wrote a memo with several other white women that proposed addressing the question of sexism in the organization. They argued that men's sense of superiority in the civil rights movement was 'as widespread and deep-rooted and every bit as crippling to the women as assumptions of white supremacy are to the Negro.' The memo would go down in women's history as one of the first attempts to expand the modern civil rights movement's concerns to include gender as well as race.<sup>34</sup>

Through the efforts of Civil Rights activists, legislation was passed to reflect a legal equality between men and women. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, passed in 1964, prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of race color, religion, sex, or

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 146.

national origin. This was one of many factors that changed the cultural climate of America in a way that enabled the empowerment of women.

### The Pill

Another change that allowed for the emergence of women in the rabbinate was the invention and legalization of the birth control pill. Author Deborah Felder relates the text of an article written in the June, 1990 the *Ladies' Home Journal*: "It's easy to forget how truly liberating the Pill Seemed to be in 1960. Nothing else in this century – perhaps not even winning the right to vote- made such an immediate difference in women's lives... It allowed women to think seriously about careers..."<sup>35</sup> She argues that "women with the Pill no longer were prisoners of reproduction and were allowed to expand their possibilities and opportunities beyond that of motherhood."<sup>36</sup> The Pill represented a fundamental change in the way women could envision their lives by allowing women to be in control of planning their futures.

Gail Collins has suggested that the Pill contributed to women's increased sense of independence and liberation during the 1960s -1970s: "The Pill, which went on the market in 1960, not only gave women more confidence about their ability to plan a career; it gave employers more confidence that when a woman said she wasn't planning to get pregnant, she meant it."<sup>37</sup> Female employees and students had the tools to prioritize their career over raising a family if they so chose: "Young unmarried women did not have widespread access to the Pill until the early 1970s – which not coincidentally was the same time they began to apply to medical, law, dental, and business schools in large

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<sup>35</sup> Deborah Felder, *A Century of Women: The Most Influential Events in Twentieth-Century Women's History*, (New York: Citadel Press. 1999) P. 231

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 231f.

<sup>37</sup> Collins, 102

numbers.”<sup>38</sup> The notion of “family planning” meant that women could decide if and when they wanted to become pregnant, and that employers could trust that women would make these decisions responsibly.

### Literature

Another catalyst in the emergence of women in the rabbinate was the emergence of literature written by women about the experience of women. Jewish author Betty Friedan’s book, *The Feminine Mystique*, was first published in 1963. Friedan articulated the growing desire among women to reach beyond the lives of a housewife and explore the potentials of education and a career. Expressing the question “Is this all?” Friedan gave a voice to generations of women silenced by the expectations of their gender and urged her readers to use it:

The feminine mystique has succeeded in burying millions of American women alive. There is no way for these women to break out of their comfortable concentration camps except by finally putting forth an effort – that human effort which reaches beyond biology, beyond the narrow walls of home, to help shape the future.<sup>39</sup>

Friedan’s was one call for women to expand their understanding of the role they could play in society. This call reached women of all ages, from students who had enrolled in college to meet their husbands who were realizing that they might use their education to support a career, to women who had long been housewives and were now facing a nest empty of children and full of potential:

Once children were out of the nest, some mothers found new challenges in volunteer work or caring for the offspring of their working daughters. But many women, still in the prime of their lives, were left with no real role at all. The attractions of marriage and motherhood didn’t fade, but women felt an increasing

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>39</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company. 1997), P. 325

need for a second string – a place in the working world that would provide them with a sense of identity and usefulness once the children had grown.<sup>40</sup>

Another influential work, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, was inspired by a group of women who met to discuss their thoughts and feelings regarding being women in what was termed a “consciousness-raising group.” These groups were often pointed in their discussions, focusing on topics ranging from the experience of women mistreated by doctors, employers, or other groups to the experience of women in the rabbinate. The meetings often resulted in a tangible product or response that addressed the concerns from a uniquely female viewpoint: “In 1969 a small group of women in Boston decided to get together and share their ‘feelings of frustration and anger toward... doctors who were condescending, paternalistic, judgmental, and noninformative’.”<sup>41</sup> The product of this group was the book *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, a monumental collection of information and stories about women’s physical and emotional experiences. The work was an example of this phenomenon, of a change in women’s understanding of power:

Virtually everyone who spent anytime in a consciousness-raising group experiences what the writer Jane O’Reilly called a ‘click of recognition’ – ‘that parenthesis of truth around a little thing that completes the puzzle of reality in women’s minds.’ It was the moment when a woman realized how the men in her life really saw her, or what her place in society really was.<sup>42</sup>

*Our Bodies, Ourselves* exemplified this recognition: “The consciousness-raising group was the central tool of the women’s movement, and it was as simple as a handful of people sitting down together once a week to talk about being women.”<sup>43</sup> Through these discussions, women voiced concerns and were often surprised to find that the issues they raised were similarly shared by the other members of the group. As a community of

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<sup>40</sup> Collins, 103.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 166-167.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 188.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 186.

women, they were able to foster a sense of security that enabled members to share intimately and to support each other: “In many more groups, the women encouraged one another to ‘go for it,’ whatever the ‘it’ of their dreams might be, and created a safe atmosphere for poking into painful areas such as body image or low self-esteem.”<sup>44</sup>

Some of the rabbis interviewed referenced these works as having direct influence upon their decisions, though the more notable impacts were on society at large. Women’s literature gave voice to perceptions and realities that had previously not been expressed, and, through that, added to a cohesive feeling among women.

### A Perfect Storm

These, of course, were not the only factors which led to the emergence of women in the rabbinate. Collins describes a “perfect storm” of social and political conditions that made for the possibility of change:

So there it was: the postwar economy created a demand for women workers, and the postindustrial economy created jobs that they were particularly suited to fill. The soaring expectations of the postwar boom, followed by the decline in men’s paychecks in the 1970s, made wives’ participation in the workforce almost a requisite for middle-class life. The birth control pill gave young women confidence that they could pursue a career without interruption by pregnancy. The civil rights movement made women conscious of the ways they had been treated like second-class citizens and made them determined that their own status was one of the things they were going to change. It was, all in all, a benevolent version of the perfect storm.<sup>45</sup>

These conditions illustrate the varied factors that supported the emergence of women in the rabbinate. Rights granted by the Civil Rights Act, professional choices enabled by the invention of the birth control pill, and camaraderie supported by women’s literature, along with other developments at the time, set the stage for women’s emergence in the rabbinate. It is noteworthy that the rise of women in the rabbinate was

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 187

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 105

also congruent with the rise of women in the professional world. Many of the women who applied to rabbinical schools in the first years were women who had come of age alongside female colleagues also entering the professional world. As evidenced by the interviews collected for this thesis, the experience of the pioneering women in the rabbinate was influenced by their cultural milieu, both directly and indirectly.

### Individuals, Events and Organizations Crucial to the Emergence of Women in the Rabbinate

#### Neil Kominsky (Chair of the Central Conference of American Rabbis Task Force on Women in the Rabbinate, 1978-1983)

Much of the information we have on the subject of women's earliest experiences in the rabbinate comes from Rabbi Neil Kominsky, who chaired the CCAR Task Force on Women in the Rabbinate from 1978 to 1983. He donated the papers of this task force to the American Jewish Archives (AJA), and these primary documents shed light on the early struggles that these first women in the rabbinate encountered. The collection contains correspondence between Kominsky and many other individuals, including women rabbis and a diverse array of leaders in the Reform movement. It also contains a number of near-print materials on the subject.

Kominsky was a staunch supporter of women both in the general professional world and in the rabbinate. On December 17, 1976, Kominsky addressed a letter to Rabbi Joseph B. Glaser, the Executive Vice President of the CCAR, expressing his interest in the establishment of "a task force on women in the rabbinate." He writes: "I believe that this is a most important way of approaching what may well be a few rather trying years until the concept of actual women as rabbis, rather than theoretical women as rabbis, has

worked into the Reform movement.”<sup>46</sup> This interest and dedication landed Rabbi Kominsky the leadership position of Chairman of the Task Force on Women in the Rabbinat in 1978, to which he was appointed by Rabbi Ely Pilchik, then president of the CCAR.

#### The 1979 CCAR Convention

In 1979, the Central Conference of American Rabbis convention was slated to take place in Phoenix, AZ. In a letter dated March 26, 1979, the ordained women rabbis of the Reform movement (Karen Fox, Laura Geller, Rosalind Gold, Sally Priesand, Deborah Prinz, and Myra Soifer) cosigned a letter detailing their struggle with a decision to attend the convention. “We are torn between two allegiances,” they write. The decision to hold the convention in Arizona posed a conundrum between a commitment to support the Equal Rights Amendment, which was actively being ratified by states throughout the union, a commitment which Reform Judaism claimed to uphold, and the desire to support the CCAR:

We are disappointed that the Conference has not chosen to manifest its stated support of ERA through the boycott of non-ratified states, though this action is supported by the other arms of Reform Judaism and its legality was upheld by the decision of Federal Judge Hunter, of the District Court for the Western District of Missouri, Central Division, February 21, 1979, who determined that the action against non-ratified states is a form of free speech and is not subject to restraint under the anti-trust laws.

On the other hand, we would like to acknowledge our involvement in the CCAR by participating in its convention. While we are pleased that the program committee has provided several sessions to deal with ERA and with issues connected to women in Reform Judaism, we would prefer to focus on these issues in a state supportive of ERA.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> American Jewish Archives. MSS Col. No. 677. Correspondence 1976-1979

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. For more information on the Equal Rights Amendment see, Gilbert Yale Steiner, *Constitutional Inequality: The Political Fortunes of the Equal Rights Amendment*, Brookings University Press, Washington, DC, 1985.

In the position of needing to choose between forgoing their commitment to the boycott, during which time they might engage colleagues on this issue, and standing firm on their commitment to the boycott, and hopefully raising consciousness by their absence, the women ultimately chose to participate in the convention. The women rabbis outlined a number of topics which they planned to bring to the table for discussion, addressing women in the rabbinate, in lay leadership positions, and the general concerns of Jewish women.

While these women ultimately chose to attend the conference, the questions raised were significant and transformative. These questions demonstrated a shift in thinking that extended beyond the explicit legal rights of women to the implicit needs of women. While the former can be shown through historical record and facts, the latter is more difficult to assess and address. We see these expressed in the personal correspondence of women rabbis, how they responded to interviews, in the minutes of their meetings, and in their publications.<sup>48</sup>

#### The Women's Rabbinic Network, 1980

The origin of the Women's Rabbinic Network was a "consciousness-raising" meeting held at Central Synagogue, New York City, in February of 1980. The meeting, facilitated by Dr. Alice Rubenstein, included all of the women who had been ordained by

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<sup>48</sup> See, for example, *Minutes of the Opening Meeting of the Task Force on Women in the Rabbinate of the Central Conference of American Rabbis*, Phoenix, AZ, March 26, 1979 (AJA, MSS Col. No. 677, Correspondence 1976-1979) and *Draft Survey on Women in the Rabbinate* by Karen Fox and Deborah Prinz. (AJA, MSS Col. No. 677, Correspondence 1976-1979) In a "Draft Survey on Women in the Rabbinate," Karen Fox and Deborah Prinz pose the following questions: "Can a married woman meet a man for a professional dinner without an OK from her husband? Can a married woman handle a time-consuming job (What about her real responsibilities to her husband)? Can a man follow a woman's career? These questions indicate that a lot of simple consciousness-raising must be done with our rabbinic colleagues, to enable them to see female rabbis on a par with male rabbis." (AJA, MSS Col. No. 677, Correspondence 1976-1979)

HUC-JIR as well as women currently in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> year classes. Women in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year classes could attend, but their participation would not be subsidized by the two organizations funding the event, the CCAR and HUC-JIR. The “Gathering of Women Rabbis and Rabbinic Students of the Central Conference of American Rabbis Task Force on Women in the Rabbinate” had 41 participants who met to discuss the theme of the “choices we make as rabbis” and the reasoning behind those choices. “The gathering had four goals: 1) to facilitate personal sharing among the women; 2) to create bonds of trust and sharing; 3) to clarify personal and professional issues; and 4) to outline a common agenda.” They met these by organizing mixers, panel discussions, text studies, and other programming that would facilitate discussion among the women and group reflection of the experiences of women in the rabbinate:

The reactions to the gathering were uniformly positive. All of the women especially appreciated the opportunity to meet with their colleagues and share their feelings about their work and themselves. The meeting succeeded in creating links among women and in strengthening their ties to the Reform Movement.<sup>49</sup>

Women who attended worked on drafts of papers to present to the CCAR on topics including maternity leave, childcare and placement. Motivated by this conference, women on the Cincinnati campus started the on-campus childcare collaborative, the Jewish Early Learning Collaborative (JELC). The meeting also resulted in the official formation of the Women’s Rabbinic Network (WRN), which included a newsletter that focused on women’s and served as a springboard for the development of innovative ideas. While these results were valuable, the conference itself, and the relationships which were fostered therein, may very well have been the most significant developments.

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<sup>49</sup> American Jewish Archives. MSS Col. No. 677. Correspondence, 1980. “Report on the Gathering of Women Rabbis and Rabbinic Students of the Central Conference of American Rabbis Task Force on Women in the Rabbinate.”

This supposition comes from the thoughts of Norah Ephron, who facilitated a similar meeting resulting in a supplement to the *Ladies' Home Journal*:

Looking back, Ephron thought that the real victory had been not the supplement but the demonstration itself. 'They had gotten all this publicity, and it was really kind of great.' It was the pattern that would continue through the movement's course. Things that seemed critical at the time, from the Commission on the Status of Women to the *Ladies' Home Journal* supplement, would turn out to be important not in themselves but for the way they changed the women who worked on them, and the country that watched it all happen.<sup>50</sup>

While we can see the tangible results of this and subsequent meetings, it is difficult to measure the personal impact they had upon individual students. Not only did the meetings provide a unique experience for the women who attended, their existence undoubtedly enticed women who were considering a career in the rabbinate.

Ultimately, the Women's Rabbinic Network was established to provide support for women along side the Task Force on Women in the Rabbinate, which dealt with the practical needs of women. These two groups worked together to tackle the issues faced by the pioneering women rabbis.

#### Response to Criticism, 1979

In the March 1979 issue of *Sh'ma, A Journal of Jewish Responsibility*, Pinchas Stolper, a prominent Orthodox rabbi, published an article titled: "Women Rabbis as a Death Sign."<sup>51</sup> This article expressed his perceptions of women in the rabbinate and held that their involvement in Jewish leadership would not only be detrimental to Judaism but to the individual rabbis as well.

The experience of the Reform Movement, which has ordained women rabbis for several years, has not been successful. None of the ordained women hold their

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<sup>50</sup> Collins, 198

<sup>51</sup> Stolper was the founder and National Director of the National Conference of Synagogue Youth (NCSY) of the Orthodox Union. He subsequently served for close to twenty years as the head of the Orthodox Union as its executive vice-president.

own pulpit exclusively, and one has become disillusioned and left the rabbinate. A few weeks ago, Sally Priesand, the first reformed 'rabbi' resigned because she was unable to go beyond the 'associate rabbi' level. Women who choose to become 'rabbis' find themselves dissatisfied once they have achieved their goal, because the phenomenon stems from a basic misunderstanding of the woman's role in the synagogue and Judaism. On the other hand, the graduates of Orthodoxy's women's institutions as a rule find deep satisfaction in the roles provided for them throughout the Orthodox Jewish community.<sup>52</sup>

Later that month, at the opening meeting of the Task Force on Women in the Rabbinate of the CCAR, the committee discussed Stolper's article and planned to compose a response that would address his misrepresentations of women in the Reform rabbinate.<sup>53</sup> Shortly thereafter, Rabbi Kominsky drafted a letter to the editor of *Sh'ma* which began, "Perhaps Pinchas Stolper's article ("Women Rabbis as a Death Sign") in the March 16<sup>th</sup> *Sh'ma* was simply misplaced from your Purim issue and not meant to be taken seriously."<sup>54</sup> Kominsky indeed corrected Stolper's errors, gave context to his statements, and concluded with the following sentiment:

The women who have become Reform rabbis have, in general, within the relatively short experience available to them, found the rabbinate a satisfying and challenging profession and an opportunity for genuine service to the Jewish people... Those of us who are committed to women as colleagues in the rabbinate look forward to seeing women move into their full share of responsibility and leadership within our movement and within the Jewish people during the years before us.<sup>55</sup>

This letter was not printed in *Sh'ma*, because it was received after the subsequent edition had gone to print. Rabbi Stolper received a personal copy of the letter and sent a reply to Kominsky: in an attempt to backpedal out of his earlier statements, he replied,

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<sup>52</sup> Stolper, Pinchas. "Women Rabbis as a Death Sign" in *Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Responsibility*, 9/170. March 16, 1979. American Jewish Archives, MSS Col. No. 677 Correspondence 1976-1979. Page 74.

<sup>53</sup> Minutes of the Opening Meeting of the Task Force on Women in the Rabbinate of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, Phoenix, AZ, March 26, 1979. American Jewish Archives, MSS Col. No. 677 Correspondence 1976-1979

<sup>54</sup> Kominsky, Neil. "Letter to the Editor of *Sh'ma*, April 5, 1979 by Neil Kominsky, Chairperson of the Task Force on Women in the Rabbinate of the CCAR." American Jewish Archives, MSS Col. No. 677 Correspondence 1976-1979.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

“Frankly, I was not addressing myself to the phenomenon of women rabbis in the Reform movement. This departure from tradition fits the pattern of Reform’s overall abandonment of *Halacha*.”<sup>56</sup> Rather, he claimed to have been addressing the Conservative movement explaining that their acceptance of women rabbis will splinter the movement, causing congregations to disassociate and move to the Reform movement. Such were the sentiments of those opponents to the decisions of the Reform movement to ordain women rabbis. Whether they saw it as a drastic and foreboding change or simply another example of Reform’s departure from their understanding of Judaism, the individuals standing in opposition to women rabbis had voices that were loud and clear: women would not be acceptable leaders for all Jews.

#### Reviewing the Placement Process, 1980

Another issue faced by the bodies established to protect women in the rabbinate was that of placement. The rabbinic placement process consists of a series of interviews set up to allow congregations to meet a variety of rabbinic candidates in order to find the best match. Rabbis are eligible for differently sized congregations based on the number of years they have served in the rabbinate. As women entered each phase of their careers, and were eligible for larger and larger congregations, they were faced with a new population of congregants wrestling with the positive and negative aspects of interviewing and hiring women rabbis. As she was the first woman ordained in the United States, Sally Priesand was also the first to experience applying for the position of rabbi of a solo (single rabbi) congregation. She found that, in doing so, many congregations refused to interview her based solely on the fact that she was a woman. As

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<sup>56</sup> April 30, 1979, Personal Letter from Stolper to Kominsky. American Jewish Archives, MSS Col. No. 677 Correspondence 1976-1979.

more and more women came to this phase in their careers, it became evident that something needed to be done.

In January of 1980, Rabbi Myra Soifer addressed a personal letter to Rabbi Kominsky, bemoaning her experience in the rabbinate. Her concerns addressed the situation of women rabbis struggling with integration into the rabbinate:

I have become increasingly concerned about the future of women in the rabbinate over the last several months. Where once we thought that as more of us were ordained our problems would lessen, I am now beginning to feel that this is not at all the case. No longer are we just a few 'tokens' who as such are not very threatening. As our numbers grow, I become increasingly concerned about a sort of 'backlash' that seems to be developing.<sup>57</sup>

As a result of the experience of women rabbis, the question of the placement process became a topic for discussion among the organizational branches of the Reform Movement, namely the CCAR, HUC-JIR, and the UAHC. By August of 1980, these organizations had drafted a proposal that outlined their expectations of rabbinic placement, which included specific provisions ensuring the rights of women, older rabbis, and single rabbis. This proposal was submitted by Rabbi Joseph B. Glaser, Executive Vice President CCAR; Rabbi Jack Stern, Chairman of the Commission; and Rabbi A. Stanley Dreyfus, Director of Placement. Here they outlined the need for such provisions, explaining the common reactions and responses to the interviewing of women rabbis.

Among the objections offered against engaging a woman rabbi, either as assistant or as a solo or senior rabbi in her own congregation are the following:

1. The traditional segment of the congregation will be grievously offended, to the point of withholding financial support or even of mass resignation, if a woman is invited to serve in a novel capacity which Jewish law had never contemplated. Sometimes dark hints are offered that weddings at which a woman officiates are Jewishly illegal and that her funerals do not guarantee that passage to the World-to-Come in which, under other circumstances, the speaker does not believe.

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<sup>57</sup> Letter From Rabbi Myra Soifer to Rabbi Kominsky, January 2, 1980. American Jewish Archives, MSS Col. No. 677 Correspondence.

(Strangely, those who feel obliged to report this attitude which is described as widespread in the congregation, always deplore the narrowness of the anonymous congregants to whom it is ascribed, while at the same time those who comment on the phenomenon always protest their inability to change it; they are certain that it is futile to try.

2. The allegation that a woman would be exposed to mortal danger if in the course of her regular rabbinical duties she had to attend evening meetings or if an emergency demanded her presence in the hospital in the early hours of the morning.
3. The allegation that a woman would instinctively neglect her rabbinical responsibilities in order to fulfil [sic] her responsibilities to her spouse and children. Furthermore, the congregation would have to bear the cost of providing a substitute while the official rabbi was on maternity leave.
4. The contention that a rabbinic role model can only be male.
5. The allegation that romantic involvements are likely to ensue if a woman rabbi is required to meet with a male member of the congregation in the course of her official duties.<sup>58</sup>

These objections were in keeping with others shared in interviews of women rabbis and in the meetings of the Women's Rabbinic Network. The solution presented was to include in the requirements of the congregation a clause that legally established the rights of groups historically discriminated against. The proposal stated:

When a congregation initiates a search for a rabbi, it is asked by the Placement Commission to subscribe to the following declaration:

In keeping with the spirit of Reform Judaism, our congregation will not exclude a candidate recommended by the Placement Commission on the grounds that such candidate is male or female, younger or older, single or married.<sup>59</sup>

However, the commission recognized that "it is easy enough to find a pretext for disqualifying any applicant without running the risk of social disapproval."<sup>60</sup> Rabbis were well aware that their application might be overlooked based on their personal lives, even when they were told by a congregation that they were not considered because of their merits. In order to prevent this from happening, the Commission established a group of

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<sup>58</sup> "A proposal to the CCAR/UAHC/HUC-JIR Joint Rabbinical Placement Commission." American Jewish Archives, MSS Col. No. 677 Correspondence, 1980.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

“Placement Assistance Teams,” or groups of professionals, “composed of a member or former member of the Placement Commission, the UAHC Regional Director, and, in some instances, a person with skills in group dynamics.”<sup>61</sup> These teams would approach interviewing congregations to discuss the variety of candidates available to them, and specifically speak to the experience of women in the rabbinate in order to encourage congregations to consider hiring women rabbis.

The team will be instructed:

1. To remind the congregation of the commitment of Reform Judaism to the ethical principle of equality of the sexes in all matters of religion, as well as to the ethical imperative of giving fair consideration to applicants regardless of their marital status or age.
2. To make the congregation sensitive to the injustices done in rejecting rabbis as a group, without considering each as an individual, possessed of unique talents and aptitudes.
3. To help those responsible for the selection of a rabbi to understand why some people are prejudiced against rabbis who are women, or who are unmarried, or who are ‘older.’<sup>62</sup>

Those developing the plan were aware that changing the culture of the Reform Movement could not happen over night. The plan read, “It is expected that the Plan will have to be implemented over a period of ten years before women rabbis are so completely accepted that their presence in the pulpit will no longer occasion surprise or hostility.”<sup>63</sup> While most rabbis supported these endeavors, there was some backlash. “A few male rabbis have evinced resentment at what they perceive to be a form of affirmative action in behalf of women.”<sup>64</sup> The ultimate goal of the Commission was clear, to ensure equal opportunity for the students it ordains. “The commission’s purpose is to provide everyone with opportunity for advancement in the rabbinate, in accordance with

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

the merits of the individual.”<sup>65</sup> While this was the goal for older rabbis and single rabbis, the experience of and interest in women was unique:

...the situation of women rabbis is different: the Reform Movement has encouraged women qua women to study for the rabbinate and the encouragement implies a pledge to find them suitable employment as rabbis throughout their professional careers. We of the Placement Commission look upon that obligation with the utmost seriousness. We shall welcome assistance in addressing this difficult and emotion-freighted problem. When it is ultimately solved, as we are confident it will be, our efforts will be amply repaid by the benefits women rabbis will have brought to Reform Judaism and to the larger Jewish community.<sup>66</sup>

Advancements like that of the Placement Assistant teams were small steps in the task of fully integrating women into the rabbinate, but ones whose impact was crucial to the success of women rabbis.

### Conclusion

Women did not enter or experience the rabbinate in a vacuum. Women rabbis share in a history of increasing women's rights, medical advancements, and growing awareness of the needs of women which allowed women to not only enter the rabbinate but many other professions as well. The seminal individuals, events, and organizations that impacted the emergence of women in the rabbinate show evidence of support and understanding alongside discouragement and ignorance. Understanding these historical experiences can help contextualize how women perceived their experience in the rabbinate. Outlining these historical events and figures contextualizes how these women entered the rabbinate and established themselves in the field.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER TWO: Image and Fashion in the Rabbinate

The purpose of this chapter is to explain that fashion in the rabbinate, while seemingly a superficial topic at first glance, actually had a marked impact upon the experiences of the pioneering women in the Reform rabbinate. Women in the rabbinate had their appearances commented on by congregants, were evaluated by the clothes and accessories they wore, and were asked deeply personal questions about their appearance. While none of the women interviewed for this thesis described fashion as a having the biggest impact on their rabbinate, all shared stories of ways in which their image ultimately affected their careers. I will show that the presence of women in the rabbinate ultimately diversified the fashion choices for the rabbinate as a whole.

### The Image of the Fictional Rabbi

In the folktale, *A Rabbi for a Day*, the Rabbi of Dubno is traveling with a driver who asks of him a favor. The driver explains that he would like to experience the life of a rabbi and receive the honor and attention that a rabbi receives. In order to make the switch he asks, “Would you mind if we were to exchange clothes for one day? Then they’ll think I am the great preacher and you the driver, so they’ll honor me instead.” The rabbi replies, “You know, the rabbi’s clothes don’t make a rabbi.” They exchange clothing, and honor is indeed granted to the driver. In the end, when the driver is asked a question to show his knowledge, he explains to the townspeople that their question is so simple that even his driver could answer it and hands the interpretation of Torah off to the learned rabbi.<sup>67</sup> This humorous anecdote, designed to teach us that clothing “doesn’t

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<sup>67</sup> Nathan Ausubel. *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*. (New York: Crown Publishing, 1989), P. 21-22

make the man,” instead shows the significance of the rabbi’s clothing. Clothing, in this story, comes to symbolize power, wisdom, and honor.

The same is not the case for the portrayal of clothing of women in the rabbinate. Bob Elias’s modern parody, *Fruma Biber – Girl Rabbi*, recounts the fictional life of the world’s first female rabbi. When asked what steps she will take to win the respect of her congregation, she explains that she will grow a beard.<sup>68</sup> When asked what difficulties she anticipates in her new post, she replied, “I haven’t been able to buy any really right outfits. This black affair from Bonwit Teller is just perfect for Shabbat, and I have something in violet in mind for the High Holy days, but besides that, I haven’t found anything to really say *me*.”<sup>69</sup> Here, her clothing symbolizes frivolity and vanity.

In these examples we recognize the symbolic value placed on clothing, and note the discrepancy between how men and women are viewed. These stories present a perspective of how rabbis are viewed by non-rabbis, and illustrate the discrepancy between the male and female rabbis’ attire.

### A Professional Woman

Understanding the fashion choices of the pioneering women in the rabbinate must be done with an eye upon the general cultural significance of women’s fashion. During the 1970s, women entering the work force across the board faced the challenge of choosing professional clothing. Noted feminist scholar Susan Brownmiller authored the book *Femininity*, which details the issues women faced regarding their image in light of the changing feminist ideals of the time. She begins her chapter on clothing by explaining why women care about how they look and how women demonstrate their concern:

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<sup>68</sup> Jacob Raider Marcus, *The American Jewish Woman: A Documentary History*. (New York: Ktav Publishing, 1981) P. 884

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 885

To care about feminine fashion, and to do it well, is to be obsessively involved in inconsequential details on a serious basis. There is no relief. To not be involved is to risk looking eccentric and peculiar, or sloppy and uncared for, or mannish and manhating [sic], or all of the above.<sup>70</sup>

A woman makes a statement about her ideals by opting into or out of the trivialities of feminine fashion. Brownmiller concludes: “Who said that clothes make a statement? What an understatement that was. Clothes never shut up. They gabble on endlessly, making their intentional and unintentional points.”<sup>71</sup> Clothing, Brownmiller explains, carries significance beyond modesty or warmth; it expresses a set of values attributed to the woman who wears it.

For professional women, the need to balance professionalism and personality was manifest in their clothing choices. Brownmiller writes that “Serious women have a difficult time with clothes, not necessarily because they lack a developed sense of style, but because feminine clothes are not designed to project a serious demeanor.”<sup>72</sup> Frilly shirts, dangling earrings, and high heeled shoes can hold connotations of treating the work place as a trivial and frivolous environment:

Despite the proliferation of advice manuals on what the up-and-coming young female executive should wear to the office, dressing feminine remains incompatible with looking corporate, credible and competent, and no dress-for-success book has been able to resolve the inherent contradictions, or provide the extra time and money that maintaining a feminine wardrobe requires.<sup>73</sup>

Brownmiller explains that the expectation of professional women is to simultaneously appear powerful and demure: “Few think it odd that the brave new careerist must obscure her breasts and display her legs in order to prove she can function in a masculine world and yet retain some familiar, comforting aspect of the feminine

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<sup>70</sup> Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity*. (New York: Linden Books. 1984.) P. 81

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

difference.”<sup>74</sup> In a statement that seems to specifically ring true to the rabbinate, Brownmiller concludes that “tradition in clothes may well outlast tradition in occupation.”<sup>75</sup>

In an article published in 1993, Deborah Tannen writes about the phenomenon of women’s marked status in American culture. She explains that women are marked by their appearance in ways that men are not.<sup>76</sup> Women’s hairstyles, clothing choices, makeup, and accessories indicate decisions that the woman has made. Tannen explains that men can make decisions to be marked,<sup>77</sup> but can remain unmarked if they so choose. Even the title of “woman rabbi” marked women in the rabbinate. Historically described as women rabbis, female rabbis, and lady rabbis, the titles of these rabbis indicate that congregants and community members perceived them differently than male rabbis.<sup>78</sup> Tannen writes: “I asked myself what style we women could have adopted that would have been unmarked, like the men’s. The answer was none. There is no unmarked woman:”

There is no woman’s hair style that can be called standard, that says nothing about her. The range of women’s hair styles is staggering, but a woman whose hair has

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> “The term “marked” is a staple of linguistic theory. It refers to the way language alters the base meaning of a word by adding a linguistic particle that has no meaning on its own. The unmarked form of a word carries the meaning that goes without saying -- what you think of when you’re not thinking anything special. The unmarked tense of verbs in English is the present -- for example, visit. To indicate past, you mark the verb by adding ed to yield visited. For future, you add a word: will visit. Nouns are presumed to be singular until marked for plural, typically by adding s or es, so visit becomes visits and dish becomes dishes. The unmarked forms of most English words also convey “male.” Being male is the unmarked case. Endings like ess and ette mark words as “female.” Unfortunately, they also tend to mark them for frivolousness. ... Gender markers pick up extra meanings that reflect common associations with the female gender: not quite serious, often sexual.” Deborah Tannen, “Wears Jump Suit. Sensible Shoes. Uses Husband’s Last Name” in *The New York Times Magazine*, June 20, 1993.

<sup>77</sup> An army-style haircut, cowboy boots, or tuxedo, for example.

<sup>78</sup> Ideally, just as one would not call their male rabbi a “man rabbi,” “lord rabbi” (the equivalent of lady), or even “male rabbi,” one would not include the gender of their female rabbi in a title. In describing the experiences of women in the rabbinate, this thesis uses the above titles in order to portray the experience of these rabbis authentically.

no particular style is perceived as not caring about how she looks, which can disqualify her for many positions, and will subtly diminish her as a person in the eyes of some. Women must choose between attractive shoes and comfortable shoes... If a woman's clothing is tight or revealing (in other words, sexy), it sends a message -- an intended one of wanting to be attractive, but also a possibly unintended one of availability. If her clothes are not sexy, that too sends a message, lent meaning by the knowledge that they could have been. There are thousands of cosmetic products from which women can choose and myriad ways of applying them. Yet no makeup at all is anything but unmarked. Some men see it as a hostile refusal to please them.<sup>79</sup>

Tannen goes on to explain that women are marked not only in clothing, but in name and title as well. Unlike men who have a standard “Mr. Surname” option that reveals little about their marital status or political or societal views, women must choose to define these in their choice of letterhead. Tannen writes, “To say anything about women and men without marking oneself as either feminist or anti-feminist, male-basher or apologist for men seems as impossible for a woman as trying to get dressed in the morning without inviting interpretations of her character.”<sup>80</sup> Tannen, like Brownmiller, argues that women can barely wear clothing, introduce themselves, or speak without making a statement about who they are and what they believe.

While seemingly superficial, fashion in the rabbinate holds significance in that it marks women's values and ideals. Investigating what women rabbis chose to wear allows us to learn about how they perceived themselves and their professional realities. The exploration of rabbinic image, as made up of clothing, hairstyles, and physical attributes, acknowledges an important aspect in the rabbinates of the pioneering women rabbis. In the interviews conducted for this thesis, the women shared the difficulty of balancing femininity and functionality in the clothing they chose to wear in their rabbinates. The

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<sup>79</sup> Deborah Tannen, “Wears Jump Suit. Sensible Shoes. Uses Husband's Last Name” in *The New York Times Magazine*, June 20, 1993.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

women were reluctant to concede the importance of their physical appearance, but they were aware of the impression that their appearance gave and the expectations that others had as to how they should look.

### They Came to See What a Woman Rabbi Looked Like

Rabbi Elyse Frishman understood that hers was not the first picture people had in mind when thinking of a rabbi: “I can’t possibly look like... [what someone pictures] when one pictures a rabbi. They’re going to [picture] a male wearing a suit or something.”<sup>81</sup> Rabbi Rosalind Gold shared the story of when a younger colleague reminded her of a time she had been on a panel of rabbis: “I think I stood up and said, ‘If I just stand here and turn around and walk, will that be enough to show you? That’s what you came for... to see what a woman rabbi looks like. Well, here it is’.”<sup>82</sup> For these women, entering the rabbinate meant changing people’s perceptions of what a rabbi should look like.

Rabbi Cathy Felix described the reaction people had to hearing she was the rabbi in her first year serving Brown University: “You could see people put in their brain... you could see them put their constellation of women images and their constellations of rabbi images... and see them kind of melding them together for the first time.”<sup>83</sup> Rabbi Mindy Portnoy explained, “They were always trying to figure out what a woman rabbi would be like... it was like we were a Martian or something. You didn’t think of woman and rabbi in the same breath.”<sup>84</sup> However, this melding of images was not limited to the outsider, it was recognized by the women themselves. Rabbi Janet Marder recounted an

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<sup>81</sup> Interview with Rabbi Elyse D. Frishman, February 2, 2010.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Rabbi Rosalind A. Gold, January 28, 2010.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Rabbi Cathy L. Felix, February 19, 2010.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with Rabbi Mindy Avra Portnoy, February 9, 2010.

experience from her years at HUC-JIR in Los Angeles, CA: “I remember having a session with Laura Geller when I was at school... and I remember like paying some attention to what she was wearing, I can still remember what she was wearing actually, because I was curious about how a woman rabbi dressed.”<sup>85</sup> This transforming relationship between the image of a woman and the image of a rabbi impacted the decisions of the pioneering women in the rabbinate.

### A Rabbi In Drag

In her book, *Femininity*, Brownmiller comments on the Torahitic foundation for distinction between men’s and women’s clothing:

It is written in Deuteronomy that “The women shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman’s garment,” and the reason given refers to the strongest displeasure of the highest authority. Failure to abide by a sex-distinctive dress code is an “abomination unto the Lord thy God.” Why should the Lord have cared so intensely about clothes?<sup>86</sup>

Brownmiller answers this question by explaining that clothing allows the onlooker to distinguish between man and woman without mistake: “A sex-distinctive dress code (a loincloth for Adam, a sarong for Eve; a striped tie for Adam, a pair of high heels for Eve) created an emblematic polarity that satisfied a societal need for unambiguous division, neat categories and stable order.”<sup>87</sup> Knowing what men and women look like is an intrinsic element of society, one that was challenged by women entering careers previously dominated by men. In these cases, women were challenged to dress in a way where they could be identified with their profession without being identified as a man.

The pioneering women in the rabbinate were faced with the challenge of both fitting into the expectations of the rabbinate and remaining true to their femininity. Rabbi

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<sup>85</sup> Interview with Rabbi Janet Ross Marder, February 2, 2010.

<sup>86</sup> Brownmiller, 81.

<sup>87</sup> Brownmiller, 82.

Susan Talve commented, “I never hid being a woman. I think I tried to be careful about... I didn’t ever dress suggestively but I always – I never wanted to wear a suit – I didn’t want to pretend that I was a man outside.”<sup>88</sup> Many women spoke about receiving comments regarding facial hair. “In the early years [being a woman] was the most salient feature that anybody noticed about me,” said Rabbi Melanie Aron, “Everywhere I went [I was faced with] ‘This rabbi doesn’t have a beard.’”<sup>89</sup> The concern for Rabbi Ellen Dreyfus was remaining true to her womanhood: “I didn’t want to be a rabbi in drag. I wasn’t interested in looking like a man, walking like a man, talking like a man... and so I’d have to figure out how to do this rabbi stuff and do it as a woman.”<sup>90</sup> On the other hand, women in the rabbinate did not want only to be seen as women. Rabbi Rosalind Gold shared, “We were rabbis. We just wanted to be seen as rabbis, not women rabbis. And I think it took a while for me... to find myself as a woman in the rabbinate.”<sup>91</sup> “You couldn’t not be seen as a woman rabbi at that time,” explained Rabbi Mindy Portnoy, “everybody saw it that way, whether they were positive or negative, it was just what it was.”<sup>92</sup>

#### Did you see what the Rabbi’s wearing?

One ubiquitous phenomenon mentioned by the rabbis interviewed was the prevalence of comments shared by congregants regarding the attire of the rabbi. “I could write volumes on how many people commented on my hair and my clothes,” shared Rabbi Susan Talve. “Oy-oy-oy... [they said,] ‘Your skirt is too short.’ ‘Your skirt is too long.’ ‘Your hair is too long.’ ‘Your nose is too long.’ You name it, I’ve heard it.

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<sup>88</sup> Interview with Rabbi Susan Talve, February 11, 2010.

<sup>89</sup> Interview with Rabbi Melanie W. Aron, February 2, 2010.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with Rabbi Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus, February 16, 2010.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Rabbi Rosalind A. Gold, January 28, 2010.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with Rabbi Mindy Avra Portnoy, February 9, 2010.

Everybody's got a comment."<sup>93</sup> Rabbi Deborah Prinz explained, "People felt entitled to speak to me about my clothes, [They said,] 'Your skirt is too short, too long, be careful how your skirt looks on the *bima* because [when] you sit, we can see...'"<sup>94</sup> The rabbis shared a sense that these comments were not meant to be harmful, but rather represented a new negotiation of boundaries that congregants navigated with female rabbis. Rabbi Karen Fox shared, "People would say things about the size of our breasts, about how much we weighed, about whether we wore makeup or we didn't wear makeup, whether women rabbis colored their hair or don't color their hair..." She attributed to this to the visibility of rabbis: "Women rabbis are like other women who are professional but [we] are more visible, like politicians or perhaps litigators." Her response? "Get over it."<sup>95</sup>

The women interviewed for this thesis perceived these comments to be directly related to their gender. "I think there's much more attention paid to what [women] wear," Rabbi Elyse Frishman shared. "Someone once made a comment about... they were distracted by my legs - I said don't look... I've had a number of comments about clothing over the years, and about what I should wear and not wear. Men would never have those conversations."<sup>96</sup> Rabbi Susan Abramson shared a comparison between her experience and that of her male senior rabbi. While she would come to work wearing a skirt suit, he would wear 'shlumpy' sweaters. "He prided himself on really dressing down and wearing very kind of yucky clothes." Rabbi Abramson shared that on her evaluation she was then chastised because of her appearance. "[My evaluator said] that my appearance was an issue for people because I wasn't dressed in the manner of main-line woman. I didn't

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<sup>93</sup> Interview with Rabbi Susan Talve, February 11, 2010.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Rabbi Deborah Prinz, January 26, 2010.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Rabbi Karen L. Fox, February 9, 2010.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Rabbi Elyse D. Frishman, February 2, 2010.

wear much makeup and my hair wasn't really styled or anything, which was an important thing for women in that area."<sup>97</sup> While they admit that congregants noted men's style, women felt that congregants scrutinized theirs.

Many of the women interviewed could describe, in detail, the outfit that received the harshest criticism. Rabbi Rosalind Gold was wearing a bright yellow skirt and a top with capped sleeves which she described as "very cute:" "A woman came up to me after services and said she thought I was wrong that I exposed so much of my arm on the *bima*. And I thought, 'well, thank you for sharing that'."<sup>98</sup> Rabbi Gold did wear the outfit again, but remembers wearing it with a sweater after she received that comment. Rabbi Joan Friedman shared the following story:

I had a burgundy silk dress. When I say burgundy... it was the color of Gates of Repentance - deep, deep, deep, dark burgundy. It was short sleeve silk dress, very tailored with a waist-band and buttons up and down the front. The sleeves came down almost to the elbow. It was a very conservative dress. I wore it on a 95-degree day to conduct a funeral. [I got an anonymous] letter saying a short sleeve red dress is not appropriate for conducting a funeral.<sup>99</sup>

One of Rabbi Myra Soifer's favorite stories took place at the very beginning of her career, when she was newly-minted rabbi working at a Classical Reform congregation in New Orleans. Rabbi Soifer recounted an event that occurred walking down the long hallway between the lobby and the sanctuary. The custom in her congregation was for the rabbi to wear a robe, and Soifer remembered having trouble deciding if the collar of her shirt should be worn inside or outside of the robe. "I had it one way or the other, I can't remember, and as I was walking down the hallway the rabbi's wife stopped in and put it in the other position and as I got further down the

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<sup>97</sup> Interview with Rabbi Susan Abramson, January 28, 2010.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with Rabbi Rosalind A. Gold, January 28, 2010.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with Rabbi Joan S. Friedman, January 28, 2010.

hallway the president of the sisterhood stopped me and put it in the other position.”<sup>100</sup>

While this criticism was unlike that of Rabbis Gold and Friedman, the message was clear: members of the community felt that they had the right to change the clothing of the rabbi, a phenomenon which these women do not believe happened to male rabbis.

Many of the rabbis interviewed shared their responses to this type of comment. Rabbi Karen Fox described an elderly lady who commented when she had seen Rabbi Fox wear a particular suit before. Rabbi Fox’s response was consistently: “It’s my favorite.”<sup>101</sup> In response to criticism, rabbis commonly used humor or a playful version of the truth. Rabbi Deborah Prinz shared one of her stock responses to people who would ask about why she did not have a beard: “I would say, Let’s talk Torah, let’s not talk beard.”<sup>102</sup> Rabbi Ellen Dreyfus explained, “People would say things like, ‘Oh, you’re a rabbi and you don’t even have a beard.’ They thought that was so clever and so funny. I would respond with, ‘No, and I’m not circumcised either.’ That was that.”<sup>103</sup> One method of response was a degree of resistance. Rabbi Soifer shared, “Nobody was ever going to fault me on what I wore. If they were going to have issue with me it was going to be about stuff that matters.”<sup>104</sup> In response to a critique for not wearing stockings in the summer, Rabbi Susan Talve shared, “I just said, ‘That’s ridiculous. It’s 90 degrees outside and I have to go outside. I’m not wearing stockings. That’s your problem.’ There was a line, if somebody thought that that was a problem that was their problem, not mine.”<sup>105</sup> Through these responses, the pioneering women in the rabbinate demonstrate

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<sup>100</sup> Interview with Rabbi Myra Soifer, February 2, 2010.

<sup>101</sup> Interview with Rabbi Karen L. Fox, February 9, 2010.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Rabbi Deborah Prinz, January 26, 2010.

<sup>103</sup> Interview with Rabbi Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus, February 16, 2010.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Rabbi Myra Soifer, February 2, 2010.

<sup>105</sup> Interview with Rabbi Susan Talve, February 11, 2010.

models of dealing with comments that could be deemed inappropriate, rude, or hurtful in a way that preserves their dignity and the respect of those congregants.

The interest congregants took in the appearance of female rabbis, and the comfort lay people felt in commenting on their appearance, is multifaceted in origin. “It doesn’t matter what you wear, it’s always something for somebody to talk about,” said Rabbi Karen Fox. “Because... clothes are the access point for other women to get to know the rabbi. It creates a unity between other women.”<sup>106</sup> The conversation allows for congregants to share something personal about themselves, says Rabbi Mindy Portnoy: “It does have a certain affect on your relationship with people because you’re hearing about personal things.”<sup>107</sup> Rabbi Deborah Prinz attributed the phenomenon to a familial feeling in the congregational rabbinate, that congregants feel a parental feeling about young rabbis and speak to them like they speak to their children: “Perhaps... [this is the] license that people felt about women and the opportunity they had to speak about dress or makeup that they may not have shared in other settings.”<sup>108</sup> Regardless of the reasoning, the rabbis I interviewed agreed that congregants’ comments expressed a connection they felt with female rabbis.

Through these interviews we learn that clothing, while superficial, provided avenues by which congregants could relate to their rabbis. While communication along these avenues was done in inappropriate and appropriate ways, we learn from the responses of rabbis that treating congregants with respect, through humor and understanding, allowed for a deeper connection between congregants and their rabbis.

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<sup>106</sup> Interview with Rabbi Karen L. Fox, February 9, 2010.

<sup>107</sup> Interview with Rabbi Mindy Avra Portnoy, February 9, 2010.

<sup>108</sup> Interview with Rabbi Deborah Prinz, January 26, 2010.

Clothing served as an ice-breaker, a tool for teaching Jewish values, and a means for building relationships.

### A Navy Blue Suit or a Goddess?

Joy Levitt, a graduate of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 1981, wrote an article entitled, “Women Rabbis: A Pyrrhic Victory?” Here, she describes her perception of the differences in styles chosen by women in the rabbinate:

I see three different options being exercised among woman rabbis, as well as among active Jewish feminists. The first I’ll call the Navy Blue Suit Model. This model, adopted by an increasing number of woman professionals in general and women rabbis in particular, is based on the assumption that *woman rabbis can and should be just like man rabbis*. Having spent the last ten or fifteen years arguing that women are as capable and skilled as men, proponents of this model conclude that the only differences between men and women are those pertaining to biology. Women who subscribe to this model even suggest that biological differences, properly handled, can be minimized to such an extent as hardly to be noticed at all.<sup>109</sup>

Levitt describes the Navy Blue Suit rabbi as one who not only chooses the fashion that reflects the male rabbinate, but one who chooses the reserved tone and formal affect that characterized many rabbis before the 1960s and 70s. She explains that these women, choosing to adopt this image, acquiesce to the male standard:

So those of the Navy Blue Suit brigade adopt the American rabbi’s garb, learn how to speak in the Gothic type that has been the hallmark of the American rabbinate, and suppress those expressions of emotion that have characterized the stereotype of American women. They think they are viewing the rabbinate as gender-free. In fact, they are simply adopting the male model.<sup>110</sup>

Levitt describes the Navy Blue Suit rabbi as one end of a spectrum with the other end resting in the territory of the *Goddess* rabbi. “Proponents of this [Goddess] model not only maintain that women rabbis can’t be male rabbis. They reject the male model as

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<sup>109</sup> Joy Levitt, “Women Rabbis: A Pyrrhic Victory?” in *Contemporary American Issues*, January-February, 1985, P. 21

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

authoritarian, oppressive, and a distortion of Jewish tradition.”<sup>111</sup> Instead of fashioning their rabbinate based on the standards set by the men who preceded them, they choose to make decisions based on rejecting them.

Neither of these models, Levitt argues, represents a healthy standard for women in the rabbinate. “If the Navy Blue Suit Model distorts *women* in its attempts to secure their position, the Goddess Model distorts *Judaism* in its attempt to recapture lost imagery.”<sup>112</sup> As foreign as a suit, at that time, seemed on a woman, the idea of completely rejecting the hierarchical and patriarchal history of Judaism was too great of a departure from the norm. Furthermore, both of these models rely on the male standard, one through acceptance and one through rejection. Levitt writes, “The need for a third model – the Integrated Model – is obvious.”<sup>113</sup> Levitt describes an ideal model of the rabbinate that embraces some aspects of the male model and rejects others. This ideal, symbolized by clothing, extends to all elements of the rabbinate:

If, by women’s experience with alienation and isolation, we are able to empathize with disenfranchised people, and if, through our own success in achieving responsiveness in the Jewish community, others see the possibility of their own acceptance as well, then we will have used our anger and exhilaration well, strengthening ourselves and the community at the same time. We can’t do that by suppressing our womanhood, and we can’t do that by talking only to ourselves about ourselves. We can do that by being aware of and in touch with who we are and what the community is.<sup>114</sup>

In the exploration of style, we see deeper implications for the role of the rabbi. Women’s fashion represents more than their outward appearance, it represents how they portray their values to the world. Levitt urges women to neither suppress nor flaunt their

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>113</sup> Levitt, 23.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

womanhood, but rather to use fashion as a vehicle for responsible self-expression and community awareness.<sup>115</sup>

### A New Spectrum

When asked if they could place themselves on a spectrum spanning a Navy Blue Suit rabbi to a Goddess rabbi, the pioneering women in the rabbinate interviewed for this thesis generally responded with trepidation. About half of the women claimed to fall on the side of the Navy Blue Suit, another half claimed to fall in the middle of the spectrum. None of the women interviewed claimed to fall on the Goddess side. In categorizing their answers, two themes emerged, namely women described their fashion choices as either based on expectations, “blending” with the rabbinate as it existed, or based on their own personal “individualist” choice. This new spectrum lies between the extremes of a consciousness of both acceptance and rejection of the male model on one side and a choice to dress to one’s personal comfort and style on the other.

On one side of the spectrum of responses, rabbis like Melanie Aron decidedly stated, “I’m definitely on the side of the navy blue suit.”<sup>116</sup> Rabbi Karen Fox laughed at the question, “Well I’m not on the goddess category, let’s be real. When I interviewed for my job with the UAHC my mother got me a navy blue suit, that’s why I’m laughing. Because it was the professional look.”<sup>117</sup> Rabbi Janet Marder explained, “I tend to wear the blue suit type of clothing mostly because... I am more comfortable when people are not making comments about my clothing. I want them to focus on what I am saying and

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<sup>115</sup> While Levitt described her ideal rabbi as an integrated model, one who embraces both the masculine and feminine elements of the rabbinate, I will later argue that both the Navy Blue Suit model and the Goddess model are based on the male model, either through rejection or acceptance.

<sup>116</sup> Interview with Rabbi Melanie W. Aron, February 2, 2010.

<sup>117</sup> Interview with Rabbi Karen L. Fox, February 9, 2010.

teaching and not on what I am wearing.”<sup>118</sup> While these rabbis view their decision as one based on personal style preference, it is reasonable to suggest that part of the perception of wanting to blend in comes from wanting to look like other rabbis, male rabbis, which represents the “blending” side of the spectrum.

On the other side of this spectrum lies the “individualist” rabbi. “Individualist” rabbis might be defined as those that chose to base their style neither on the suit nor the long-flowing-skirt, even though some chose these particular clothing options. Rabbi Joan Friedman, for example, shared, “I’m probably the navy blue suit because that’s what I’m more comfortable in.”<sup>119</sup> This is not an acceptance of the male model but rather a choice based on personal preference. In response to the question regarding Levitt’s article, these rabbis responded with a middle of the line approach, a rejection of the spectrum, or an attempt to describe a place for themselves off the spectrum. Rabbi Susan Talve responded, “I would hope that I am more of a balance. I would hope that I’m me, that I’m just authentically me.” In her interview, Rabbi Talve explained that she consciously brings a feminine presence to the *bima*, to serve as a role model for young women. She explains, “If I can [channel the feminine face of God] for people, it is very humbling. I’m not afraid of that.”<sup>120</sup> Rabbi Cathy Felix shared, “I’m neither a goddess or navy blue suit I’m kind of a pants and sweater type of person I try to cultivate a more casual informal persona in my congregation so I’m in neither of those poles.”<sup>121</sup> Rabbi Mindy Portnoy also put herself in the middle of the spectrum: “I hate to put myself as somewhere in the middle but I might have to do that. I always felt like I was me... I’m definitely not the

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<sup>118</sup> Interview with Rabbi Janet Ross Marder, February 2, 2010.

<sup>119</sup> Interview with Rabbi Joan S. Friedman, January 28, 2010.

<sup>120</sup> Interview with Rabbi Susan Talve, February 11, 2010.

<sup>121</sup> Interview with Rabbi Cathy L. Felix, February 18, 2010.

goddess, but the navy blue suit makes me nervous too ‘cause I know people who are like that and I’m somewhere in the middle.”<sup>122</sup> These women do not use the arguments of blending in or feeling the necessity of dressing like existing rabbis at the time, but rather strive to remain authentic to themselves.

Many of the women who fall on the “blended” side of my spectrum explained that their choice of suit was out of necessity. Rabbi Myra Soifer explained:

I was certainly of necessity a navy-blue suit rabbi. Certainly when I started out, there was no choice. But I never understood that to mean that I was aping the male model. I only understood that to mean I was just wearing the blue suit so I could get about the business of what really mattered so people wouldn’t worry about my clothes. I’m certainly not the goddess thing by any stretch. I guess I’m closer to the navy-blue suit end, but I don’t actually accept that as a category.<sup>123</sup>

Rabbi Deborah Prinz explained that this suited phenomenon was essentially an attempt to dress like the male rabbis whose image came to mind for congregants picturing their rabbis: “In the early days most of us were blue suit rabbis... it was mostly modeling after a male image.”<sup>124</sup> Rabbi Ellen Dreyfus explained that her choice of suit was based on a desire to be taken seriously: “I want to look serious and I want to be taken seriously. Were I to wear something frilly or something frivolous or something that could be seen as somehow sloppy or too causal then I wouldn’t be taken seriously.”<sup>125</sup>

Others explained that their choice represented a desire to disappear. Rabbi Debra Hachen explained that wearing a suit is not done to look like a man, but rather to disappear.<sup>126</sup> Melanie Aron shared, “My goal in the early years of dressing was to be un-remember-able in terms of my dress, I didn’t want anyone remembering, oh my God, the

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<sup>122</sup> Interview with Rabbi Mindy Avra Portnoy, February 9, 2010.

<sup>123</sup> Interview with Rabbi Myra Soifer, February 2, 2010.

<sup>124</sup> Interview with Rabbi Deborah Prinz, January 26, 2010.

<sup>125</sup> Interview with Rabbi Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus, February 16, 2010.

<sup>126</sup> Interview with Rabbi Debra Hachen, February 4, 2010.

rabbi was wearing this and that was my general principle.”<sup>127</sup> Similarly, Rabbi Janet Marder explained, “I wanted to dress in a way that didn’t draw attention to my clothing. I wanted the attention focused on what I had to say and do.”<sup>128</sup> The “blended” side of the spectrum represents a desire to avoid attention due to style. In Tannen’s terms, it is the attempt to find an unmarked option.

“Individualist” rabbis made their choices based on personal preference. Leah Kroll explained, “I never like to be type-cast; I was always me. I, personally, always did everything my way; and I was never a suit person. I like flowers and I like earrings and nobody’s going to tell me what I need to wear, so I did things my way.”<sup>129</sup> Rabbi Susan Abramson shared:

I’m known for my socks. I’m always at religious school and I always like to find ways to connect with the kids. So I started wearing these crazy socks. So whenever I go to religious school the kids are always like really interested to see what kind of socks I’m wearing like my Chanukkah socks and different holiday types of sock so that’s kind of a fun thing.<sup>130</sup>

Rabbi Sally Priesand shared, “I decided early on to be myself. And so people often were not pleased that I had short mini skirts, high boots, and long hair.”<sup>131</sup> For each of these women, it was in these unique fashion choices that they could express their personal style and creativity.

Both the “blended” and “individualist” rabbis navigated their ideals in the rabbinate in healthy and appropriate ways. “Blended” rabbis model an understanding that people find it inherently difficult to separate one’s appearance from one’s message, especially in the case of women. Their understanding of societal expectations along with

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<sup>127</sup> Interview with Rabbi Melanie W. Aron, February 2, 2010.

<sup>128</sup> Interview with Rabbi Janet Ross Marder, February 2, 2010.

<sup>129</sup> Interview with Rabbi Leah Kroll, February 17, 2010.

<sup>130</sup> Interview with Rabbi Susan Abramson, January 28, 2010.

<sup>131</sup> Interview with Rabbi Sally J. Priesand, February 18, 2010.

their desire to “Individualist” rabbis use their image to portray the message that one cannot (and should not) judge a book by its cover. Both represent strong role models for women in the rabbinate, and both contribute to the developing image of women in the rabbinate.

### Conclusions

During the 1970s and 1980s, congregants could expect to see a male rabbi on their *bimas*. Even today, when one searches for images of rabbis using the search engine Google, the first page of images shows only male rabbis.<sup>132</sup> The integration of women into the rabbinate did not serve to replace the male image, rather to expand the realm of possibilities for how a rabbi could look. Women, by choice or necessity, brought new fashion into the rabbinate. They used that fashion to teach and connect to others. They considered whether they would chose an image that would serve to blend that of the male rabbi with the female rabbi or whether they would choose to dress to their individual style. Ultimately, the pioneering women in the rabbinate broadened the scope of acceptable possibilities for fashion in the rabbinate.

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<sup>132</sup> <http://www.google.com/images?q=rabbi&oe=utf-8&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a&um=1&ie=UTF-8&source=og&sa=N&hl=en&tab=wi> accessed 5/1/10

### CHAPTER THREE: Definitions and Expectations

The purpose of this chapter is to explore, through original research, the ways in which pioneering women rabbis considered themselves to be feminists. By their own testimonies, each defined the word differently, linking the term to the rights of women, a sense of equality between men and women, opportunities for achievement, and a desire to eliminate or change gender expectations. In addition, this chapter will attempt to show, through the personal testimonies of the pioneering women in the rabbinate, that these women believed they were viewed as representatives of women in general, and also that they shared the feeling that the future of women in the rabbinate rested on their success. Finally, this chapter will endeavor to explain the rather unique qualities of the voice of women in the rabbinate as well as the challenges that this voice presented.

#### Definitions

The first challenge in the discussion of women rabbis and feminism is in understanding the term ‘feminism’, which originated in late 19<sup>th</sup> century France, and has developed a variety of definitions since that time.<sup>133</sup> In 1913, distinguished literary critic and reporter Rebecca West shared her understanding of feminism in the socialist journal, the Clarion: “I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute...”<sup>134</sup> The American poet Alice Duer Miller, explained her definition of feminism in the following poem that was written in 1915:

“Mother, what is a Feminist?”  
 “A Feminist, my daughter,  
 Is any woman now who cares

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<sup>133</sup> Estelle Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002.) P. 3

<sup>134</sup> Cheris Kramarae and Paula A Treichler, *A Feminist Dictionary*. (London: Pandora Press, 1985.) P. 160

To think about her own affairs  
As men don't think she oughter.”<sup>135</sup>

Many have also cited the author Cheris Kramarae's familiar definition, “Feminism is the radical notion that women are people.” Feminism, in these definitions, is considered a negative term, used to connote radical objectives to beliefs which are deemed by adherents to be absolute rights. A modern definition by Estelle Freedman, author of *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* reads,

Feminism is a belief that although women and men are inherently of equal worth, most societies privilege men as a group. As a result, social movements are necessary to achieve political equality between women and men, with the understanding that gender always intersects with other social hierarchies.<sup>136</sup>

This definition recognizes that the understanding of feminism lies within its cultural context. Feminism cannot be defined without understanding the feminist movement in history, how the term has been defined throughout history, and how the term is heard today. This definition leaves room for differing understandings of feminism, which will prove useful in analyzing the rabbinical responses we received to the question analyzed later in this chapter.

### Feminism in Judaism

Over the course of history, the term “feminism” has been accepted and rejected by various groups of women fighting for specific rights, general equality, and a new understanding of gender and gender roles. Judaism has had a tenuous relationship with feminism because Jewish tradition contains teachings that emphasize the differences between men and women, such as the exemption of women from fulfilling positive time-bound mitzvot. “The feminist critique of society and culture initiated in the 1960s and

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 161.

<sup>136</sup> Freedman, 7

1970s posed profound changes to every branch of Judaism,” writes Rachel Adler, in her book *Engendering Judaism*. “Before this time, in no form of Judaism did women have equal access to communal participation, leadership, or religious education.”<sup>137</sup>

Many scholars associate the publication of Betty Friedan’s influential volume, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), as a watershed event in the history of American feminism. Friedan’s volume describes a crisis of women’s identity that is linked to societal expectations and cultural norms, and proposes that women change their perception of housework and marriage and to find and do whatever it is about which they are passionate.<sup>138</sup> Friedan’s ideas influenced a wide range of social and cultural institutions. Within liberal Judaism, the feminist movement inspired changes including the ordination of women as rabbis, liturgical innovation, and the introduction of women’s rituals such as *Rosh Chodesh* groups and naming ceremonies for baby girls.

Feminism influenced traditional Jews as well as liberal Jews. In her book *On Women and Judaism*, Blu Greenberg, a self-ascribed “traditional Jew” wrote: “I have tried to show that there are both precedent and process within the Jewish tradition for bringing women to a position of full equality. This process need not – indeed must not – be equated with a diminishing of the divine essence of Judaism and Halakhah.”<sup>139</sup> The first chapter of Greenberg’s book is dedicated to the question “Feminism: Is it good for the Jews?”<sup>140</sup> Greenberg described the roots of the schism between traditional Judaism and the feminist movement:

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<sup>137</sup> Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society. 1998.)

<sup>138</sup> Friedan, 342-343.

<sup>139</sup> Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society. 1981.) P. x

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 3.

The aims, achievements, and to some extent even the processes of feminism have been revolutionary. The fact that it has been a bloodless revolution leads some people to dismiss feminism as a petulant, middle-class women's hobby. Regardless, the women's movement has profoundly altered social attitudes toward women and the way women think about themselves. Increasingly, public philosophy and policy assume that women are full human beings with a capacity for achievement in all spheres in which men function. Women are no longer simply adjuncts of the men in their lives. Our secular, legal, social, and educational systems are under constant pressure to include women as equals; our religious institutions, however, lag far behind in the process of recognition.<sup>141</sup>

According to Greenberg, traditional Judaism is fundamentally at odds with feminism because of a disconnect in ideology. Feminism embraces equality between men and women and Judaism embraces the differences between the genders. The radical nature of feminism, which supports cultural upheaval, also runs counter to Jewish tradition.

There are, however, places where feminism and Judaism overlap, and there Greenberg found a home: "Jewish feminists must affirm the basic Jewish principle that the human being is valuable in his or her very being."<sup>142</sup> Ultimately, Greenberg argued that feminism is indeed good for the Jews:

It is no mean task to walk the fine line between old and new, status quo and avant-garde, traditions and change, God's commandments and the emerging needs of societies and individuals. But Judaism has survived considerable odds and has managed to contribute greatly to world civilization precisely because in each era it managed to walk that fine line. To keep the balance between these opposing forces is probably more difficult now – the forces are stronger and at a higher level of tension in our time, and society is more open. But our faith in Judaism and the Jewish people gives us the strength to demand and expect the same achievement in our time. It is a task worthy of the effort.<sup>143</sup>

One way in which this balance is reached in Liberal Judaism is by reinterpretation of traditional texts. An example of this inclination to reinterpret is rooted in a teaching that comes from Rabbi Moses Sofer, a 19th century scholar. Moses Sofer explained a

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 19

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 20

scenario of a woman who was in labor and, during the course of the birth process, the fetus imperiled the woman's life. Moses Sofer asserted that "no woman is required to build up the world by destroying herself."<sup>144</sup> Here, his comments implied that the woman is not required to sacrifice her life for the life of the fetus. Modern feminists took this teaching to imply that women are not responsible for putting their lives in danger for the sake of benefiting the world at large. In this way, feminist reinterpretations become, for Blu Greenberg, a vehicle for changing Judaism through reinterpretation.

### Self-defined Feminists

In the interviews with pioneering women in the rabbinate conducted for this thesis, not a single woman described a feminist agenda among her reasons for entering the rabbinate (and some vehemently argued against it!), but every rabbi interviewed declared herself a feminist. On one hand, women rabbis openly attribute the ordination of women to the feminist movement. Rabbi Deborah Prinz commented, "The very reality of the ordination of women is a direct result of feminism. I think that women chose to become rabbis in the early days was a direct result of feminism."<sup>145</sup> On the other hand, women rabbis avoid attributing their personal decision to enter the rabbinate to feminism, but rather emphasize their desire to enter the rabbinate because it was the path they chose. As Susan Abramson noted, "At that time our mindset was that we were not doing this because we're making some huge feminist statement. We're just doing this because there was no reason we [couldn't] pursue the careers of our choice and this [was] what we

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<sup>144</sup> Even HaEzer #20. Vienna, 1855.

<sup>145</sup> Interview with Rabbi Deborah Prinz, January 26, 2010.

choose.”<sup>146</sup> Rabbi Elyse Frishman was among the few rabbis who hesitated in defining herself as a feminist. She explained:

I guess that a better way to answer that is that I don't see myself as any kind of an –ist. I tend to be... if anything I'm probably... I'm more of an individualist. I tend not to follow rules if there are rules. I tend to break them if I want to break them. I tend to create systems that haven't existed before. **Without hesitation feminism enabled me to do what I am doing today and I indebted to the women who really pushed for equal access and redefined gender roles being determined by the individual and not by society. I feel keenly about all of that.** The term has evolved over time and I have not thought over time about what that means. When my husband and I first got married, feminist ideals shaped our relationship and our marriage. The obviousness of keeping my name; the obviousness of there never being pressure on me to stay home so he could do what he wanted to do; there never being an expectation that one of us would be an “x”-type of a parent vs. the other. Feminism absolutely influenced each of us in this regard. I would hold those same values for anyone else. So if that's what a feminist is, that's what I am.<sup>147</sup> [Emphasis added]

It is clear that while these women attribute the opportunity to pursue a career in the rabbinate partially to the feminist movement and, though they consider themselves to be feminists, they do not attribute their personal motivation to enter the rabbinate to their own feminist ideals.

#### Varied Definition of Feminism

While every rabbi interviewed claimed to be a feminist, no two defined it in the same way. When asked to define the term “feminism,” the answers given by the pioneering women rabbis tended to fall into four general categories. The first category might be referred to as the “egalitarian rationale.” Some of the pioneering women rabbis asserted that they considered themselves to be feminists because they believed that women are fully equal to men in every respect. A second category may be described as the “civil rights rationale.” This group of respondents consists of those who defined their

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<sup>146</sup> Interview with Rabbi Susan Abramson, January 28, 2010.

<sup>147</sup> Interview with Rabbi Elyse D. Frishman, February 2, 2010.

feminism by a commitment to human rights and human equality. The third category was the “human potential” rationale. This category included those respondents who viewed feminism in terms of individual achievement, the ability for all humans to reach their highest potential. A fourth category might be termed the “oppositional rationale,” and this category appears to be distinctly different from the first three. The “oppositional” category included women who see feminism as a commitment to the rejection of gender expectations.

### The Egalitarian Rationale

A portion of the rabbis I interviewed linked their understanding of feminism to a commitment to creating equality between women and men. All of these definitions shared a common conviction that women have not historically been treated equally to men and that the goal of feminism is to raise the status of women to its rightful place on equal footing with men. Some feminists of this classification have argued that to achieve equality after years of degradation, women’s status must become higher than that of men or, alternatively, men’s status must be lowered so that men and women stand on the same plane. Rabbi Helene Ferris, the oldest of the rabbis interviewed, explained her understanding of feminism in the following way: “Feminism, I see as advocating for leveling the field for women in this world. Like affirmative action for women...”<sup>148</sup> Rabbi Debra Hachen explained that her definition of feminism comes from the language of the 1970s and 80s. A feminist, she states, is, “a person who believes that women can do the same kind of things that men do... there shouldn’t be any culturally determined differences between what men and women can do in the workplace or generally in the

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<sup>148</sup> Interview with Rabbi Helene Ferris, January 25, 2010.

home.”<sup>149</sup> Rabbi Mindy Portnoy explained that she absolutely considers herself a feminist. “I’ve always thought of it as women having the same rights and responsibilities just as men, that we all have equal rights and responsibilities. In that way I’m still of the equal rights feminism group. How can I not be?”<sup>150</sup> Rabbi Ellen Dreyfus referred to Kramarae’s definition of feminism: “I think someone once defined feminism as... the belief that women are fully human, or something like that. Yes, of course [I believe in] the notion that women had equal potential and capability in most aspects of life.”<sup>151</sup> Here Dreyfus implied that regarding women’s relationship with men – women had equal potential *to men*. Dreyfus added that she affirmed the belief that anatomy did not imply destiny in regards to anything other than the ability to give birth to a child, and specifically that gender should not affect the opportunity to participate in a career of choice. The definitions of feminism by these women share the understanding of women in relationship to men. Because of historical male privilege, an effort must be made to increase women’s rights, raise the level of awareness about women’s issues, raise salaries, and more in order for women *become* equal to men. The definitions are rooted in the historical differences between the genders and the aspects of the feminist movement that sought to equalize the genders not previously considered equal.

### Civil Rights Rationale

Women who fall into the second category defined feminism as a belief in an inherent civil and social equality between males and females. Women in this category insisted that men and women possessed a native and self-evident human equality. To argue that women needed to made equal to men seemed absurd to this group of women.

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<sup>149</sup> Interview with Rabbi Debra Hachen, February 4, 2010.

<sup>150</sup> Interview with Rabbi Mindy Avra Portnoy, February 9, 2010.

<sup>151</sup> Interview with Rabbi Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus, February 16, 2010.

Women and men were equal! The problem that needed to be addressed was that society had not recognized this equality, and therefore it was necessary to fight for civil and social rights. As Rabbi Myra Soifer shared:

I am absolutely a feminist, a passionate feminist. To me, feminism is... simply that all human beings, no matter what their gender - be they male or female, are entitled to the same rights, responsibilities, privileges, justice... feminism for me is about commitment to equality for men and women.<sup>152</sup>

Similarly, Rabbi Janet Marder explained, "I define it as meaning equal choices for males and females, equal opportunities for males and females in our society, and the right to pursue the careers and the lives that we find fulfilling."<sup>153</sup> Rabbi Melanie Aron explained feminism as, "The struggle for women's rights and the equality of opportunity." She continued, "I'm very aware of cultural feminism and certainly in my work bringing the women's voice in Judaism has been very important, but I still see feminism primarily as a civil rights issue."<sup>154</sup> Unlike women in the first category, these women emphasized the inherent equality between males and females, rather than indicating a need for women to become equal to men.

#### Human Potential Rationale

The third category included women who defined feminism as the belief that women were entitled to pursue the same opportunities and achievements as their male counterparts. Rabbi Sally Priesand shared, "I definitely consider myself a feminist because I believe that feminism simply means every person should have the opportunity to become all that he or she is capable of becoming and so in that sense I'm definitely a

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<sup>152</sup> Interview with Rabbi Myra Soifer, February 2, 2010.

<sup>153</sup> Interview with Rabbi Janet Ross Marder, February 2, 2010.

<sup>154</sup> Interview with Rabbi Melanie W. Aron, February 2, 2010.

feminist.”<sup>155</sup> Similarly, Rabbi Susan Abramson defined feminism as an understanding “that women should have the ability to do whatever they aspire to be. [Women should] just be able to work in the field that we want to without being labeled by our gender.”<sup>156</sup>

Rabbi Leah Kroll defined feminism as, “A movement that allows human beings to reach their potential in whatever field they want to explore even if the barriers have not been broken in that field.”<sup>157</sup> For each of these women, feminism was linked to an opportunity to achieve.

### The “Oppositional” Category

In the final category of definitions, we see explanations of feminism that do not emphasize equality but rather focus on the elimination of gender roles and gender expectations. For these women, it is not feminism’s task to raise women to the level of men, to convince others to see the inherent equality between the genders, or to allow women to advance in their achievements but rather to change how men and women are viewed by society in all ways. Rabbi Rosalind Gold explained, “I would define feminism as the belief that neither men nor women should be defined solely by gender roles, by traditional gender roles. That’s what I think of as feminism.” When asked if her definition had changed over the course of her rabbinate, she responded:

No, if anything, I think it’s gotten stronger, actually. I will tell you that... if somebody had asked me in my earlier days if I was a feminist, I would say yes. [Back then] I thought of [feminism] more in terms as women can do anything. But now I think of it as much more than that now... because men can do anything too.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Interview with Rabbi Sally Priesand, February 18, 2010.

<sup>156</sup> Interview with Rabbi Susan Abramson, January 28, 2010.

<sup>157</sup> Interview with Rabbi Leah Kroll, February 17, 2010.

<sup>158</sup> Interview with Rabbi Rosalind A. Gold, January 28, 2010.

Here Gold alludes to a shift in understanding feminism that is typically identified with “the third wave” of feminism. Unlike feminists before the 1960’s (the first wave) who fought for specific rights for women and those from the 1960s-1980s (the second wave) who fought for general equality, feminists in the third wave advocated the elimination gender biases. Rabbi Joan Friedman also falls into this category: “Absolutely I consider myself a feminist. To me it means that women should have the opportunity to choose to lead their own lives as they want free of gender expectations.” Friedman elaborated:

Feminism means that women should have the opportunity to develop and be who they would like to be free of constraints based on assumptions about sex or gender but it also means that our society and culture should value the presence of women as much as they value the presence of men.<sup>159</sup>

Rabbi Susan Talve explained, “Feminism, to me, is including the feminine in the whole. In other words, I do feel that I do see the world differently because of my place on the gender spectrum.” Instead of the binary genders of male and female, Talve referred to the notion that there are other genders present on a spectrum, a belief championed by those of the transgender community. The endpoints of the spectrum are male and female, but other identities exist between these poles. Talve expatiated:

You know, I’m in a particular place on the gender spectrum and I believe in order for the world to be whole, and for things to be balanced in the universe, and for us to live without war and without famine, to live in peace, that the whole spectrum of gender consciousness needs to be reflected in all areas of life, including the religious realm, including the political realm, including, you know, all of the realms. There needs to be a balance, and there needs to be the whole of the gender spectrum, so that’s what feminism is to me.<sup>160</sup>

While Talve’s understanding of feminism goes beyond those of Gold and Friedman, they all share a common rejection of gender biases and gender expectations.

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<sup>159</sup> Interview with Rabbi Joan S. Friedman, January 28, 2010.

<sup>160</sup> Interview with Rabbi Susan Talve, February 11, 2010.

### A Changing Definition of Feminism

One interesting trend throughout the interviews of the pioneering women in the rabbinate was an acknowledgement of the changing definition of feminism. Most of these women were alive during all three “waves” of feminism, and many of the interviewees acknowledged that the definition of feminism had changed over time. Rabbi Helene Ferris, for example, noted that she grew up before Betty Friedan had published *The Feminine Mystique*. It would have been unusual if her mother, who was born in 1910, had worked in any career other than housewife:

So in that generation... we were not supposed to work, we were supposed to have good manners, look pretty, do the nice thing, the right thing. And I remember when I wanted to work, my father, he was a dentist, my father said, ‘What would people think if my daughter has to work?’ So I accepted that.<sup>161</sup>

Ferris said that it wasn’t until she became a rabbi that she noticed the inequality between how men and women were treated. She shared, “It wasn’t until I came into the world as a rabbi, as a human being, and looked around me and realized that women were not being treated very well. And I saw more and more of this, not so much in my rabbinate as in my learning about the world.”<sup>162</sup> Rabbi Sally Priesand expressed a similar sentiment.

Priesand, who was ordained in 1972, decided she wanted to be a rabbi ten years earlier: “I decided I wanted to be a rabbi in 1962 that was before the feminist movement, it was before Betty Friedan’s book and in that period of time, the early years when I was in rabbinic school, women’s lib was a negative term.”<sup>163</sup> Priesand explained that, because of

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<sup>161</sup> Interview with Rabbi Helene Ferris, January 25, 2010.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Interview with Rabbi Sally J. Priesand, February 18, 2010.

those negative connotations, she would deny being part of the women's liberation movement. She explained:

I've been thinking a lot about this lately, when there is a movement and your trying to make significant changes, you have to have people to do a lot of different components, so you have to have some people out there protesting, and marching, speaking, screaming and yelling and you also have to have some people who are just quietly accomplishing the goal and they both sort of come together then to make a difference. I was more in the background trying to accomplish the goal, and so I very often said I wasn't into women's liberation. In a certain sense that was true only because I didn't feel I personally didn't have anything to be liberated from. In my family my brothers and I were treated the same, and also my parents encouraged me to be a rabbi if that's what I wanted to do.<sup>164</sup>

In preparation for a museum exhibit chronicling her experience in the rabbinate, Priesand revisited the documents and newspaper clippings in her collection. Looking back, Priesand regretted some of the statements she made in newspaper interviews. Today, she attributes some of these discomforting comments to the understanding of women's rights at the time of her ordination. "I said some really stupid things, like if I married a rabbi I would only be an assistant because a man should be the head of the house. I wish I could take those out of the articles, but you can't change history."<sup>165</sup> The change that did occur, however, the emergence of women in the rabbinate, served to raise awareness of the issues of equality between women and men and feminism within the context of Judaism.

At the other end of the timeline of the women interviewed for this thesis, Rabbi Debra Hachen, who was ordained in 1980, came of age during the second wave of feminism. Her decision to become a rabbi occurred well after the publication of Friedan's work and the invention of the birth control pill. Still, Hachen recognized a change in the definition of feminism:

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

Feminism has developed a lot since then but that's the original kind of feminism... in the late 60s, early 70s when I was going to college... There were women's rights, women should have a full voice, women should have the same job opportunities, women should be paid the same, shouldn't be relegated to one kind of way of life as opposed to having everything open to them as it was to men. But of course feminism has then changed, that's not the modern definition of feminism. It became a philosophy and outlook that goes beyond gender.<sup>166</sup>

Hachen also explained that she no longer uses the word feminist to describe herself. "I think that feminist is an old-fashioned word like saying I'm a Hebrew instead of saying I'm a Jew. So, for me, I don't find it a really good moniker... but I'm committed to the same things that feminism stood for back then."<sup>167</sup> The pioneering women in the rabbinate had an important and complex relationship with feminism, one further complicated by the changes in feminism that occurred over the course of their lifetimes. The variety in their understanding of feminism contributes to our understanding of the diversity women brought to the rabbinate.

### Expectations

Apart from identification as feminists, the most echoed idea among the interviews conducted for this thesis was the feeling that the pioneering women in the rabbinate were held to a high expectation because their choices and actions would impinge on future generations of women in the rabbinate. If they failed, or if they were perceived to have failed, it would indicate to their congregations that women, as a whole, were not cut out for the rabbinate. By their own testimony it is clear that most of the pioneers shared a common belief that the future of women in the rabbinate rested on them. "When you're the first of something you're conscious of the fact that people judge the idea of women in the rabbinate by how you fulfill your responsibilities. I was very conscious of that,"

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<sup>166</sup> Interview with Rabbi Debra Hachen, February 4, 2010.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

explained Rabbi Sally Priesand. “I was conscious of the fact that people who came to visit our synagogue... for them it was the first time they had experienced a woman as a rabbi. When they walked out the door their whole concept of women rabbis had to do with how I did that day.”<sup>168</sup> The pressure of being the first was not limited to Priesand, but echoed by the vast majority of the women interviewed for this thesis.

The following responses were mostly prompted by the question: “What pressures were unique to you as a pioneering woman in the rabbinate?” Although the rabbis interviewed were not aware of the answers of previous respondents, their answers clearly reveal that all of these women felt that future generations of women rabbis would be judged by their successes and/or failures. They felt a keen pressure to perform because they believed that their careers would influence the roll that women would play in the future of the rabbinate.

Rabbi Deborah Prinz: I felt that everything I said and everything I did was a **reflection for all future rabbis**.<sup>169</sup> [Emphasis added]

Rabbi Janet Marder: An awful lot was riding on every sermon or lesson or program that I gave because I was **representing all women**. It is difficult for anybody who is representing not only themselves but impressions of what a woman rabbi is. That is a lot of responsibility. The first women rabbis were constantly being invited to speak and teach and there was just a lot of extra responsibility to educate the community to this new phenomenon.<sup>170</sup> [Emphasis added]

Rabbi Melanie Aron: I think it's the sense that everything I was doing was **representative of all women**. If you dropped the ball in any way it was not just a reflection on you, it was a reflection on women in the rabbinate. I felt that pressure to make sure that everything I did publicly was totally well prepared and good. It wasn't just me, it was all my female colleagues into the future who were going to be punished if I was not doing what was well and good.<sup>171</sup> [Emphasis added]

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<sup>168</sup> Interview with Rabbi Sally J. Priesand, February 18, 2010.

<sup>169</sup> Interview with Rabbi Deborah Prinz, January 26, 2010.

<sup>170</sup> Interview with Rabbi Janet Ross Marder, February 2, 2010.

<sup>171</sup> Interview with Rabbi Melanie W. Aron, February 2, 2010.

Rabbi Rosalind Gold: So yeah, there was a sense that you knew that what you'd do would **reflect on all women**. For many people you were the first woman rabbi they'd ever met, and that they were going to form their ideas about all women rabbis based on their feeling about you. So, yes, that was a lot of pressure... I was constantly having to prove that, no, I didn't get in on some kind of affirmative action program and, yes, I actually studied as much, and I was either as bright or as stupid as any other rabbi. [The pressure to prove] that women should be able to be as bright or as stupid as any other rabbi. Everything felt like a test. Everything felt like a test.<sup>172</sup> [Emphasis added]

Rabbi Leah Kroll: We felt that if we screwed up on anything then that would be the death knell of women in the rabbinate. What I remember was huge pressure to perform... so any rabbi felt you were only as good as your last sermon, [all the more so] we felt that. If we weren't 100%... I remember my colleagues saying, "Oh wow, Leah you are always 100% ready, you prepared for everything!" I wanted to say, "Well, guys, there's a reason why I'm prepared for everything." I think that for the first 7-8 years after I was ordained I, and in talking to friends of mine I know that they felt the same way, that **if we screwed up publicly they would say, "See, women can't be rabbis."**<sup>173</sup> [Emphasis added]

The ramifications of this phenomenon were felt not only in the inner conviction that pioneering women had to prove themselves to be worthy academically, but also in the decisions they made about their career choices. Priesand described her choice to remain unmarried and childless as a deliberate one, explaining that she did not feel as though she could devote the requisite amount of time and energy that both the rabbinate and the roll of wife and mother deserved.<sup>174</sup> Rabbi Mindy Portnoy told about her experience deciding which career path she wanted to take:

All women rabbis were not alike and yet we were perceived as one group and that was frustrating. Any decision you made was stressful. When I was deciding [if I was] going to leave Hillel or going to work as a congregational rabbi or going to work somewhat part time, every decision seemed monumental. It felt like whatever you did everyone would say that's what women rabbis do.<sup>175</sup>

<sup>172</sup> Interview with Rabbi Rosalind A. Gold, January 28, 2010.

<sup>173</sup> Interview with Rabbi Leah Kroll, February 17, 2010.

<sup>174</sup> Interview with Rabbi Sally J. Priesand, February 18, 2010.

<sup>175</sup> Interview with Rabbi Mindy Avra Portnoy, February 9, 2010.

When Portnoy ultimately decided to take her first job with a Hillel, she felt remorse that she had not taken the congregational assistantship she had been offered. She worried that her own decision to forego serving as an assistant rabbi might cause many congregations to eschew offering these positions to women in the future as a result of her own personal decision. She explained the extra pressure of the feeling: “Am I letting down my colleagues? Am I letting down future women in the rabbinate? It became a bigger issue than just what did I need to do for myself and for my career and for the Jewish community.”<sup>176</sup>

In these responses, some of the distinctive pressures that came with the pioneering role can be seen in bold relief. These women perceived that they were being held to a higher standard than their male counterparts because of their gender. They felt that their successes and failures did not represent merely their own personal achievements or defeats but rather would affect how people would judge the next generation of women in the rabbinate. Rabbis perceived these pressures on the pulpit and in the lifestyle decisions they made.

### Stereotypical Women Rabbis

Another common perception among the pioneering women rabbis interviewed for this thesis was the desire to avoid being cast as a stereotypical female rabbi. The issue is tied both to feminism and to the pressure of being pioneers because many women interviewed expressed the sentiment that they were expected to speak only about issues related to women, and wanted to avoid doing so because of a desire not to be “pigeon-holed” as single-issue rabbis, not only for themselves but for women in general. As pioneers in the field, these women were frequently called to speak around the country on

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

the topic of “women in the rabbinate.” This allowed women rabbis to become more visible, to create personal connections between congregants and female rabbis, and to allow women to dictate the message congregants were receiving about their ordination. This also meant that women’s first introduction to congregations was not as “rabbis” but as “women rabbis.”

According to their own testimonies, the first women in the rabbinate encountered stereotyping that assumed female rabbis all shared the same common attributes, feelings, or experiences. Rabbi Deborah Prinz recalled that, upon first encounter, people anticipated that she would be a “strident feminist... [that we were] only out there to create feminist congregations and only with our feminist agenda, that we were only one issue rabbis.”<sup>177</sup> Rabbi Cathy Felix remembered that many people simply assumed that because she was liberal enough to believe that women could become rabbis, that she would simultaneously be liberal in making all of her religious decisions:

One of the assumptions was that it was so radical to have a woman that I would be therefore be liberal about religious decisions. [It was expected] that I would... officiate at intermarriages or gay commitment ceremonies, or that... I couldn’t care how kosher the kitchen is. [Because] I had transgressed this boundary of the “maleness” of the rabbinate, [I would be] interested in transgressing other boundaries in Judaism.<sup>178</sup>

These assumptions were not based on trends found in conversations with female rabbis but rather on how others expected they would act and what others expected them to believe.

The issue of expectations for women in the rabbinate is tied to the assumption that all women will behave in the same way. Rabbi Debra Hachen shared an experience from her first year of study at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. She recalled the

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<sup>177</sup> Interview with Rabbi Deborah Prinz, January 26, 2010.

<sup>178</sup> Interview with Rabbi Cathy L. Felix, February 18, 2010.

conversations she had with her classmates that were centered on the relationship between gender and the rabbinate:

We would argue, “Are you a woman rabbi or are you a rabbi who is a woman?” That was the big discussion that would go on. Are you a rabbi first and your being a woman is just a quality that shouldn’t be distinguished like any other quality? Is it like being tall or short or you could be into social action or be into worship or whatever it is? Is being a woman just an adjective or is there something essential about being a woman that makes you different as a rabbi? That was a big part of the debates when I was going through rabbinic school.<sup>179</sup>

Rabbi Mindy Portnoy explained that people often confused her with Rabbi Ellen Lewis. Except for the fact that they were both pioneering women in the rabbinate with “dark curly hair,” Portnoy explained that she and Rabbi Lewis “barely look alike at all.” Portnoy explained that it was common for people to approach her and explain that they had heard her speak and then describe a speech given by Lewis. She explains the feeling that if one woman rabbi acted or spoke in a certain way, it represented all women rabbis: “It was sort of like... if it’s one woman rabbi it is all women rabbis. It was both positive and negative; there was a sense we were representing more than ourselves... I did feel that a lot in the early days, I feel like I lived in horse and buggy times.”<sup>180</sup> Part of the confusion may have arisen from the fact that women were being asked to give the same speeches to congregations on what it meant to be a woman in the rabbinate.

Rabbi Leah Kroll explained that, as students, one way for women to earn extra money was to accept speaking engagements: “We would all make money because the hottest topic at the time was Women in Judaism or Feminism in Judaism. We all used to get these speaking engagements and that paid part of our way through rabbinic

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<sup>179</sup> Interview with Rabbi Debra Hachen, February 4, 2010.

<sup>180</sup> Interview with Rabbi Mindy Avra Portnoy, February 9, 2010.

school.”<sup>181</sup> She described files of notes on these topics that she used for conferences and sisterhood presentations. Hachen also shared a story about an interaction she had with Rabbi Robert Miller of Newton, Massachusetts. Rabbi Miller had invited her to speak to his congregation and specifically requested that she not speak about women’s issues or being a woman. She remembered his request: “I specifically don’t want you to speak... on anything that had to do with women... I want you to just speak... in just the same way that a man rabbi would speak because I don’t want them to see you as a woman rabbi who speaks about only women in Judaism.” Hachen described her sense of relief:

At the beginning, people said come and speak about women and women’s roles and women’s roles in the Bible. I had my little note cards with my standard speeches about that because that’s what everybody wanted to hear about. We were helping to dispel all kinds of myths. But there was a certain point at which it’s like *all right*, I’m just a rabbi. Treat me just like a rabbi, like any other rabbi.<sup>182</sup>

Rabbi Rosalind Gold explained that even when she suggested alternate topics she was told that congregations hoped she would speak on women in the rabbinate: “Even fairly recently I was asked to be a scholar in residence somewhere and I had suggested some topics that I might speak on. The person finally came back and said well we were really hoping you’d talk about women in the rabbinate.”<sup>183</sup>

One outcome of these speaking engagements was a feeling of resentment from men who were not receiving the publicity or the stipends that came with these opportunities. Rabbi Susan Abramson shared:

I was asked to speak a lot about what it was like to be a woman rabbi or what it was like to be a woman rabbinical student. I think there was a little bit of

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<sup>181</sup> Interview with Rabbi Leah Kroll, February 17, 2010.

<sup>182</sup> Interview with Rabbi Debra Hachen, February 4, 2010.

<sup>183</sup> Interview with Rabbi Rosalind A. Gold, January 28, 2010.

resentment on the part of the men in the class that the women were getting all of these speaking engagements that they weren't getting.<sup>184</sup>

"We didn't want to be pigeon-holed and just called to talk about women in the rabbinate and all that stuff," Rabbi Susan Talve explained. "But at that moment I realized that was my place in history. My place in history was to bring a woman's voice. That feminism, for me, meant bringing the feminine into the seminary and into Jewish experience."<sup>185</sup> Tied together with the frustrations of being asked only to speak about their gender was the feeling that these women were the only voices that could speak authentically about the experience of women in the rabbinate.

### Expectations of Voice in the Rabbinate

In understanding the expectations surrounding the voice of the woman rabbi, it is important to look at both the physical and the metaphorical voice of women. The topic of *kol isha*, a woman's physical voice, is described in Babylonian Talmud.<sup>186</sup> The Gemara cites Song of Songs, which poetically reads: "O my dove, in the cranny of the rocks, Hidden by the cliff, Let me see your face, Let me hear your voice; For your voice is sweet and your face is comely."<sup>187</sup> According to Rashi's commentary, this verse teaches us that "a woman's voice is attractive to a man, and is thus prohibited to him." Jewish tradition uses these texts to prohibit women from speaking or singing in public and Orthodox Jews still use this prohibition to forbid women from praying aloud when worshipping in synagogues or at holy sites such as the Western Wall.

The understanding of the rabbinic prohibition of *kol isha* has been reinterpreted by the Reform Movement to reflect a positive understanding of women's physical voice.

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<sup>184</sup> Interview with Rabbi Susan Abramson, January 28, 2010.

<sup>185</sup> Interview with Rabbi Susan Talve, February 11, 2010.

<sup>186</sup> Brachot 42a

<sup>187</sup> 2:14. JPS Translation.

In The Women's Haftarah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis, Rabbi

Jessica Locketz writes, "Even the phrase *kol isha* - the voice of a woman - has been redefined. Traditionally, it represented the Talmudic prohibition against hearing a woman's voice. Now, however, *kol isha* is a term used proudly by women's groups whose voices ring out loud and clear."<sup>188</sup> Reform Judaism has emphasized the value of adding women's voices, both physically and metaphorically, to worship and Jewish discourse.

A rabbi's voice was occasionally the first indication to a potential congregant that the rabbi was a woman. Rabbi Susan Abramson remembered that congregants jumped to stereotypical conclusions when they heard her voice on the telephone: "Whenever somebody would call the Temple and I would answer the phone they would never assume that I was the rabbi. There was a constant surprise when they would ask to speak to the rabbi and I would say, 'that's me.'" This was a common occurrence, she explained, "Every single time the phone would ring that little scenario was repeated."<sup>189</sup> For generations, the Jew in the pew could expect that the voice of their rabbi would be a male voice. As Rabbi Helene Ferris noted, "People in general viewed a rabbi as someone with a booming voice, an assertive kind of person. There are woman like that, which is great, but it's different; I admire that, but I was not that way." Ferris explained that she had heard people comment that "she doesn't boom out her sermons and when she gets on the radio in an interview, she's very of quiet." She explained that these congregants wanted

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<sup>188</sup> Elyse Goldstein, *The Women's Haftarah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Haftarah Portions, the 5 Megillot & Special Shabbatot*. (Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing. 2008.) P. 306

<sup>189</sup> Interview with Rabbi Susan Abramson, January 28, 2010.

“more masculine traits.”<sup>190</sup> These pioneering women rabbis did not meet the vocal expectations of the average congregant.

Some of the interviewees indicated that special effort was required of the women rabbis to be effectively heard in their congregations, perhaps because their voice defied the expectations of congregants. Rabbi Deborah Prinz explained:

I had to be articulate, clear, prepared from the *bima*, and took special care, when I had the opportunity, to learn about how to pitch my voice or project. I took the time to make sure I was heard. I learned not to speak in a monotonous tone but to vary my speaking voice effectively so people could hear me in large and small group settings and I could make my points. It was good to spend time on those issues, so I tried to... as a woman I felt I needed to.<sup>191</sup>

The pioneering women in the rabbinate struggled to make their voices recognized and respected in the rabbinic world, even before people had the opportunity to accept or reject their messages. Like their rabbinic image, the voice of the female rabbi represented a novel element, which would take time for the average Jew to accept.

Along with the physical voice of the women in the rabbinate, the metaphorical voice, the messages they shared with their congregations, were altered with the emergence of women in the rabbinate. Among the expectations for female rabbis, Rabbi Leah Kroll explained, “They expected us to be good girls and keep our mouths shut and none of us did, or few of us did.”<sup>192</sup> Instead, women in the rabbinate brought about change not only in the tenor of the voices heard from the *bima* but also by employing the voices they highlighted from Jewish tradition. Rabbi Melanie Aron explained that one aspect of her rabbinate was encouraging families to participate in lifecycle events for girls and women, such as baby namings and *b’not mitzvah*. Later in her rabbinate, when

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<sup>190</sup> Interview with Rabbi Helene Ferris, January 25, 2010.

<sup>191</sup> Interview with Rabbi Deborah Prinz, January 26, 2010.

<sup>192</sup> Interview with Rabbi Leah Kroll, February 17, 2010.

her focus shifted to scholarship, she took opportunities to research and write about women's voices in the tradition: "I wanted [to create a document that thematically paralleled *Pirkei Avot*] called *Pirke Imahot*. I had gone through the Talmud and found all those little sections where Bruriah, or Ima Shalom, some other female, Rabbi Gamiel's mother, had said something." She also translated a woman's prayerbook a congregant had received as a soldier in WWII in Italy. She explained that she was "just finding ways to make women's voices more apparent. Even to this day I teach a class every year that's on some issue related to women in Judaism; this year we're doing Jewish women's bodies." Aron still perceives a need to "encourage the hearing of women's voices" in the religious and educational life of the synagogue.<sup>193</sup>

Rabbi Susan Talve shared a story about writing a paper while she was in rabbinical school. She was charged with translating the commentary on Deuteronomy 22:23-27 which reads:

In the case of a virgin who is engaged to a man—if a man comes upon her in town and lies with her, you shall take the two of them out to the gate of that town and stone them to death: the girl because she did not cry for help in the town, and the man because he violated another man's wife. Thus you will sweep away evil from your midst. But if the man comes upon the engaged girl in the open country, and the man lies with her by force, only the man who lay with her shall die, but you shall do nothing to the girl. The girl did not incur the death penalty, for this case is like that of a man attacking another and murdering him. He came upon her in the open; though the engaged girl cried for help, there was no one to save her.<sup>194</sup>

Talve explained that she had recently read Susan Brownmiller's book *Against Our Will, Men, Women, and Rape*. She wrote her interpretation based on this work explaining that "Brownmiller's book showed that women who scream are more likely to be killed... you aren't supposed to scream whether it is the city or the field if you are being raped.

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<sup>193</sup> Interview with Rabbi Melanie W. Aron, February 2, 2010.

<sup>194</sup> JPS Translation.

because it is about power. And your rapist is more likely to injure you or kill you.” While Talve’s translation received a good grade, “when it came to my own commentary the response on my paper was ‘keep your ideas to yourself’.” Her commentary, based on modern feminist research, was deemed inappropriate by her teacher. Talve explained that she felt that this was “a perfect opportunity for me to bring a woman’s voice to this experience! Why else have women in rabbinical school, if we’re just going to do the same thing? Who needs us?”<sup>195</sup>

Rabbi Deborah Prinz explained that the way in which people heard women’s messages was representative of a larger cultural change:

There was a lot of culture shift going on and that had to do with being a woman and I think it had to do with how people hear women’s voices. For instance, if I were to talk about an issue related to equal rights in those days or the equal rights amendment or abortion... if I spoke about them from the *bima* sometimes people heard that as me talking about a women’s issue because I’m a woman and that’s it, end of story, rather than here’s my rabbi addressing an issue from a Jewish perspective because it’s a religious issue and Reform Judaism had something to say about equal rights for women... or free choice for abortion.<sup>196</sup>

This issue relates both to the understanding of feminism for women in the rabbinate and the unique voice of women rabbis. Pioneering women in the rabbinate faced the challenge of balancing their voice. On the one hand, they possessed a keen desire to address a wide range of issues by using their female voice to transmit their unique perspective. On the other hand, they did not want that to be the only voice that people heard. They did not want their voices to become monophonic, and they were determined to avoid becoming pigeon-holed as rabbis who could only speak about women or women’s issues.

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<sup>195</sup> Interview with Rabbi Susan Talve, February 11, 2010.

<sup>196</sup> Interview with Rabbi Deborah Prinz, January 26, 2010.

### Conclusion

Unanimously self-defining as feminists, the pioneering women in the Reform rabbinate upheld equality, achievement, and inclusion as tenets of their identity. While each rabbi defined feminism in different terms, many of their definitions acknowledged a changing definition, expressed gratitude for the feminist movement as a whole, and spoke to a commitment to furthering feminist values. In the interviews conducted for this thesis, an overarching trend in the perception of the pioneering women in the Reform rabbinate was that their individual actions would be held as a reflection of women rabbis in general. At the same time, many felt pressure to dispel myths about female rabbis and to build personal relationships where the only theoretical idea of a female rabbi previously existed. It is clear from their testimonies that women rabbis were cognizant of introducing novel physical and metaphorical voices to the Reform rabbinate.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: Changes in the American Reform Rabbinate**

This chapter will indicate that women perceived their entrance into the rabbinate as one that served as a catalyst for change. While they did not see the change as direct result of their gender, the mere presence of people who did not look or sound like the “traditional” rabbi, coupled with the unique challenges that women faced, created major changes in the American Reform Rabbinate. These changes included liturgical innovation, need for parental leave, and heightened awareness of women’s issues, such as the need for women’s community groups and acknowledgement of sexual harassment and unequal pay for women. The largest change recognized by the women interviewed for this thesis was a changing definition of success in the rabbinate from one based solely on the size of a rabbi’s congregation to one based on personal fulfillment, rabbinic effectiveness, and/or recognition by one’s peers.

### Changing Realities in the Reform Rabbinate

In many ways, the pioneering women in the rabbinate were like their predecessors. They met the same standards for admission to rabbinical school, received the same academic training, and served the same student pulpits male students had been serving for generations. They provided pastoral care, led worship services, facilitated lifecycle events and taught torah to adults and children. These women faced challenges of balancing professional and family life, filling their own spiritual needs and finding opportunities for professional growth like the male rabbis before them.

On the other hand, these women were not like the men that came before them or walked along side them. As described in the previous chapters, they faced unique challenges and brought new gifts. In many ways, the presence of women changed the

rabbinate. The presence of women in the rabbinate raised the awareness that rabbis needed equal opportunities in job placement, opportunities for family time and, liturgy and ritual that met their spiritual needs. Women also increased the awareness of paths other than the congregational rabbinate as viable and successful rabbinic careers. By their own testimony, we see how the pioneering women in the Reform rabbinate recognized these changes.

### Liturgical Innovation

Liturgical innovation is not a new phenomenon in Reform Judaism. As early as 1795, reformers in Amsterdam began to change the language of prayer to reflect their shifting values.<sup>197</sup> Early innovations included abolishing medieval poetry, shortening prayers, and introducing the vernacular into worship services. American prayer books were designed to provide the American Jew with a prayer experience that honored both identities. Prior to the emergence of women in the rabbinate (and for the first three years after the ordination of Rabbi Sally Priesand), the standard Reform prayer book was the *Union Prayer Book*, first published in 1895. In 1975, the Central Conference of American Rabbis published *Gates of Prayer: The New Union Prayer Book*. A “gender sensitive” version of this prayer book was published in 1994. *Mishkan T’filah: A Reform Siddur* was published in 2007 and edited by Rabbi Elyse Frishman, one of the pioneering women in the rabbinate. The transition from the *Union Prayer Book* to *Gates of Prayer* happened alongside the emergence of women in the rabbinate, while the introduction of the gender sensitive language in *Mishkan T’filah* was directly influenced by women rabbis.

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<sup>197</sup> See Jacob Petuchowski, *Prayerbook Reform in Europe*. (New York: World Union for Progressive Judaism Press. 1968.)

Rabbi Elyse Frishman, editor of *Mishkan Tefilah*, made conscious innovations in the liturgy to change the language used to describe God and to recognize the contributions of our foremothers and female leaders throughout the prayer book:

“Language matters a lot to me, for obvious reasons. Moving ahead in the liturgy I feel very sensitive not only to particular word choices... but use of God-references such as *avinu* (our father) or *malkeinu* (our king).” Frishman described reflecting on various gendered references to God and analyzing which language best described the sentiments of the prayers. For example, in *Hashkiveinu*, a prayer which asks for protection, Frishman has changed the name for God from *malkeinu*, our king, to *shomreinu*, our guardian. While this serves the function of eliminating the hierarchical male image of God, Frishman argues that it was a “better word to describe what the *Hashkivanu* was about. We wanted to... make a statement that our understanding of God has broadened and we don’t want to be limited to terms that don’t give us a sense of what the prayer is about.” Frishman explained that she does not have a problem using masculine or feminine descriptions of God. “I think that God has male and female attributes and I think it’s good to reference both.”<sup>198</sup>

While few women were directly involved in the publication of Reform prayer books prior to 2007<sup>199</sup>, one theory is that the influence of the pioneering women in the rabbinate influenced the rabbis responsible for publishing revised prayer books. Beyond the scope of published liturgy, women rabbis were responsible for challenging the conventional liturgical practices. They encouraged lay people to use gender-neutral or female language when discussing God, included the Matriarchs along with the Patriarchs,

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<sup>198</sup> Interview with Rabbi Elyse D. Frishman, February 2, 2010.

<sup>199</sup> Only Rabbi Donna Berman is listed in *Gates of Prayer for Shabbat and Weekdays* of 1994. No women were listed as contributors to prayer books published prior to that.

and created rituals for girls and women that mirrored those for boys and men. In many instances these informal changes allowed congregants to become comfortable with formal liturgical innovation.

One rabbi who commented on the liturgical innovation affected by women was Ellen Dreyfus. Her personal identification with prayer led her to change prayer language at an early age: “Long before we had inclusive liturgy I was changing the words in the liturgy. I don’t refer to God as “he”. I find that’s just way too limiting, so I was changing the words early on.” Dreyfus commented that she remembered attending a worship service soon after 1975 when the *Gates of Prayer* was first published, however, at this service the leaders had chosen to use the *Union Prayer Book*. Dreyfus commented:

There was a line in [the *Union Prayer Book*] that said something like, “God is the Father of all men.” And I thought, “Whoa! Where am I in that?” I couldn’t deal with that language. Language is important to me and precision of language is important to me, and so I did language-changing. I started including the *imahot* in the liturgy before it was in print in the books of the movement.<sup>200</sup>

Male rabbis were also initiating gender-sensitive liturgical changes in congregations, but their changes were received differently than those of their female counterparts. Rabbi Deborah Prinz described one such experience at Central Synagogue in New York. The senior rabbi at that congregation, a male, “would change the gender language to make it neutral.” She explained that the congregation had recently adopted *Gates of Prayer* as their primary prayer book but not yet internalized the shift in language between the *Union Prayer Book* and the new liturgy. Prinz explained that she and the senior rabbi would discuss the changes they planned to make and were unified in their choices. “I would [make those changes] basically the same way he did... but people would make comments about my doing it and not about him doing it. When he changed

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<sup>200</sup> Interview with Rabbi Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus, February 16, 2010.

[the liturgy] they didn't really notice it, but when I did it, it stood out." The changes Prinz made were heard differently than those of the male senior rabbi by congregants. Prinz described their remarks as, "Oh my gosh she's foisting her feminism on us in a way that we don't feel comfortable about."<sup>201</sup> While some men were indeed making similar innovations to the liturgy as women, it was the voices of women in the rabbinate who were perceived by congregants as change-makers.

Liturgical innovation began long before women were ordained as rabbis and has been supported by men and women throughout history. Interviews with the pioneering women rabbis show that they felt that they had a hand in some of the liturgical changes that have occurred. Gendered language used to describe God was particularly problematic to women in the rabbinate and their collective voice helped change the general perception of this issue. However, we have seen that when a woman rabbi speaks or teaches about gender issues, she seems to be heard negatively as a feminist rather than as one presenting an unbiased message. This perception made it challenging for women to raise issues for fear of compromising how others perceived their rabbinic fairness. The influence of women rabbis was one factor in the liturgical changes of the 1970s and 1980s and continues to be a factor in subsequent liturgical change.<sup>202</sup>

### Parental Leave

Prior to the emergence of women in the rabbinate, rabbis who wished to start or add to their families could generally do so without it affecting the time they spent in the workplace. With wives who would carry, birth, and raise the children, male rabbis were expected to work a normal schedule while being a parent. This occurred within a larger

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<sup>201</sup> Interview with Rabbi Deborah Prinz, January 26, 2010.

<sup>202</sup> Other factors include the rise of the camping movement, a general rise in gender sensitivity, etc.

cultural context in which legal precedent changed. For example, the United States Congress amended Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in 1978 in order to grant protection against pregnancy discrimination. Known as the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, the legislation prohibits discrimination “on the basis of pregnancy, childbirth related medical conditions.”<sup>203</sup> A change occurred with the emergence of women in the rabbinate wherein congregations and rabbis needed to reexamine their policies and priorities surrounding maternity, paternity, and childcare. Initially, women rabbis ran into barriers such as unsupportive congregations and little legal support, but over time parental leave became a topic of discussion, an option for rabbis, and later an expectation for rabbinic employment contracts.

Rabbi Melanie Aron explained that, when she had children, she made an effort to make the process “as painless as possible for my congregation to prove they weren’t stupid for hiring a woman rabbi. I paid for my maternity replacements with money from my discretionary fund because it was my fault they didn’t have a rabbi for that period of time.”<sup>204</sup> Over the course of her rabbinate, Aron explained that parental leave has become expected by both women and men. In fact, a specified amount of parental leave now is mandatory in rabbinic contracts. Rabbi Karen Fox described her experience with maternity leave working for the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1978:

I went to Alexander Schindler and asked for maternity leave, and he said, “Well, none of our other rabbis have asked for a maternity leave before.” I said, “None have been women before.” He thought about it a while and a few weeks later he said, “Here’s the paper on your maternity leave but don’t share it with anybody.” Of course I Xeroxed it and sent it to the others ... maybe there were 6 of us who were rabbis and women... and [so I] sent it to them.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> <http://www.eeoc.gov/laws/statutes/pregnancy.cfm> accessed 5/1/10

<sup>204</sup> Interview with Rabbi Melanie W. Aron, February 2, 2010.

<sup>205</sup> Interview with Rabbi Karen L. Fox, February 9, 2010.

Rabbi Susan Talve explained that one mission of her rabbinate was a dedication to preventing future women from making the same mistakes she did:

I do know that I have helped women not make the same mistakes I did, especially around child care issues. I started the day care center in Cincinnati because there [were no other options for child care] but I wasn't married then and I didn't have children. When it came to my turn [to have children] there was nobody to start a daycare center for me [at my congregation]. I wasn't smart enough to take maternity leave. Nobody had ever talked about maternity leave where I was. Now they talk about maternity leave and paternity leave. Women are much smarter today... I have been very clear about making sure they don't make the same mistakes that I have made.<sup>206</sup>

From Talve and Fox's testimonies, it seems clear that there was a support system among the pioneering women in the rabbinate. Women could not have made these changes without the support of men, nor could they have occurred without the cultural shifts happening simultaneously. However, it is clear from the testimonies of these rabbis that the emergence of women in the rabbinate was a catalyst for these changes.

#### Awareness of New Issues

In addition to liturgical change and parental leave, women rabbis helped raise an awareness of issues specifically pertaining to women or to which women felt a connection. According to Laura Geller, women rabbis also fostered groups of women who came together to celebrate Jewish holidays such as women's *Rosh Chodesh* groups:

Rabbis are on the front line of ritual work as well. Congregants come to their rabbi for help in negotiating the transitions of their lives – the joys and the losses. Women rabbis have created ceremonies and rituals to meet the real-life experience of the Jews they serve, and many of these rituals are for women. Covenant ceremonies for daughters, *b'not mitzvah*, weddings, divorces, ceremonies of healing from loss, miscarriage, abortion, infertility, adult survivors of childhood incest, turning fifty or sixty, children leaving home – these are all actual transitions in the lives of Jews that have led women rabbis to create ritual.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Interview with Rabbi Susan Talve, February 11, 2010.

<sup>207</sup> Zola, 72.

Rabbis interviewed for this thesis shared accounts of creating services designed for women, such as baby namings for female infants and ceremonies marking an abortion or miscarriage. They also told of speaking out in favor of women's rights and equal pay, and against sexual harassment and domestic violence.

Rabbi Sally Priesand explained that she was often reluctant to address "women's issues" from the *bima*. She explained:

The one area I have become openly more of a feminist [is in my belief] that women should be paid equally and all of those kinds of things, the laundry list of things that we're still trying to accomplish. When I speak ... I always mention those kinds of things that we've made progress but we haven't made all of the progress that we need to make. We have to fight sexual harassment and unequal pay and we still need to get women in the highest levels of leadership. In the Reform Movement we certainly have made progress. From the early days of my rabbinate, I was a strong supporter of making sure that there were more women on the faculty of the College Institute and fortunately that has happened.<sup>208</sup>

Rabbi Myra Soifer explained that she often preached on issues that specifically affected women. She routinely noted women in Jewish tradition and their contributions to Jewish history, spoke about the concerns of a hierarchical liturgy, and changes that were occurring in prayers with which congregants were no longer familiar:

When I changed language, initially wherever I went, I had to preach on what I was doing so people would understand why I wasn't reading what was in the prayer book. I would certainly preach on women figures in the text and what might have been their perspective. [I would] open up the possibility of different *midrashic* viewpoints that were from women's points of view, and so forth. I always preached about social justice issues. They were things that were considered to be more of women's issues. I would argue with that, but they were certainly high concerns on the feminist agenda when they may not have been on other people's [agendas].<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Interview with Rabbi Sally J. Priesand, February 18, 2010.

<sup>209</sup> Interview with Rabbi Myra Soifer, February 2, 2010.

When asked how those sermon choices were received, Soifer responded that the reactions varied between congregations. Generally congregants were upset with changes to liturgy or other familiar elements of the synagogue, but that they eventually “got over it.”<sup>210</sup>

Women, who spoke to each other about the issues they faced in the rabbinate, supported each other when facing problems such as negotiating for the time they needed.<sup>211</sup> The women even described times at early CCAR conferences when they would meet in bathrooms to discuss issues they were facing in the rabbinate. Women rabbis were in a unique position to hear and respond to the needs of women, both among their colleagues and for female congregants they served.

#### Changing the Definition of Success

Of the rabbis interviewed for this thesis, the most widely agreed upon change was a redefinition of how success was measured in the rabbinate. After ordination from rabbinical school, graduates of the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion have been eligible to serve congregations overseen by the Rabbinic Placement Commission. Congregations, based on their size, hire rabbis with varying degrees of experience. Recent graduates are eligible to serve the smallest congregations (known as A congregations) as the sole rabbinic presence, or as assistants for more experienced rabbis at larger congregations (C, D, and E congregations can potentially support more than one rabbi, sometimes hiring assistant and associate rabbis). Prior to the ordination of women, “successful” rabbis would begin at an A congregation (or as an assistant at a larger congregation), move to a B when they had served the requisite number of years, then graduated to a C, D, and finally reach the pinnacle of their career at the largest E

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Evidence of this is seen in the minutes of the early meetings of the Women’s Rabbinic Network described in Chapter One of this thesis.

congregation. Many of the rabbis interviewed for this thesis described this phenomenon as a “whose is bigger?” measure of success.<sup>212</sup>

Rabbi Cathy Felix expressed the belief that the emergence of women in the rabbinate affected the definition of success:

When I went to school there was a clear line of success; a successful rabbi was ordained and became an assistant and then maybe took a middle-size congregation and then became rabbi of a huge congregation. That was a true success path. I think one of the gifts that women have given the rabbinate is to say, “No, there are many different ways of being a rabbi and that there are many different career paths and somebody could choose!” [It is possible] never to want to be in a large congregation for all sorts of reasons... [success] isn’t a question of [saying,] “Who’s is bigger?” I think part of that whole transition has to do with women in the field.<sup>213</sup>

Today, Felix believes that the measure of success has broadened: “I think that who is considered a publicly successful rabbi has become more decentralized.” She explained that rabbis gain prestige by offering “insightful, wise information and advice” in internet-based forums for the rabbinic community. “Here are rabbis who are known for their social action or different aspect of the rabbinate, people who are published, who have become scholars. I think even within the public valuing of rabbis there’s been kind of a decentralization that has gone on.”<sup>214</sup> Rabbinic prestige is based on breadth of influence, rather than the ability to impact a self-contained group, no matter how large a congregation or organization led by a particular rabbi.

Rabbi Deborah Prinz described the changes in the rabbinate as open and family-friendly: “I think [there was] a move to a more democratic rabbinate, a less authoritarian

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<sup>212</sup> For further information on the study of rabbinic careers see Rita J. Simon's "Rabbis and Ministers: Women of the Book and the Cloth," in *Rabbis, Lawyers, Immigrants, Thieves: Exploring Women's Role* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993), p. 63-71. Also, Elaine Shizhal Cohen, "Rabbis' Roles and Occupational Goals: Men and Women in the Contemporary American Rabbinate," *Conservative Judaism* 42 (Fall 1989): p. 20-30.

<sup>213</sup> Interview with Rabbi Cathy L. Felix, February 18, 2010.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

rabbinate, a less front and center rabbinate, [one] more open to input [from a] participatory Jewish community. I think that has something to do with the presence of women.”<sup>215</sup> Rabbi Ellen Dreyfus explained that choices she made in her rabbinate were difficult because she did not follow the typical path to success:

The assumption in those days... was if you wanted to be successful in the rabbinate you would go into an assistantship immediately upon ordination. You’d learn now to do that and then you’d go off to a solo congregation and work your way up until you could be the senior rabbi at of mega temple, and that was the definition of success. I was not interested in any of that. First of all, I chose to work part time, which was completely, should we say, counter-cultural. I also have been in a small congregation for many, many years and didn’t feel the need to be in a large congregation. There’s something very rewarding and really very lovely for those of us who have the temperament for it. [I like being] in a small congregation and never felt that that [I] was not as successful as [someone] in a large congregation. I just completely reject size as a measure of success. Changing the definition of success is something that I think women have contributed to the rabbinate. I think we simply weren’t interested in the corporate categories of success.<sup>216</sup>

Rabbi Myra Soifer also attributed the changing definition of success partially to the emergence of women in the rabbinate:

Even the notion of success in the rabbinate changed radically and I think women were in the center of all of that ... women or their allies... It used to be the notion that you got out [of rabbinical school] and you marched up the ladder to an E congregation and that was the measure of success. Women were making different choices and allowing men to make different choices as well. It wasn’t a given that you had to strive to be in an E congregation and work 90 hours a week and never see your family. I think that that change was certainly driven by women in the rabbinate.<sup>217</sup>

From her early days at CCAR conventions, Rabbi Rosalind Gold remembers rabbis saying, “The cream rises to the top.” She explained that the predominant understanding among rabbis was that “the best rabbis were the ones who became rabbis of the largest congregations. God forbid you became a chaplain, fey, Hillel rabbi - I mean

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<sup>215</sup> Interview with Rabbi Deborah Prinz, January 26, 2010.

<sup>216</sup> Interview with Rabbi Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus, February 16, 2010.

<sup>217</sup> Interview with Rabbi Myra Soifer, February 2, 2010.

those were the losers - not that they were but they were considered [to be] people that really couldn't really make it." She believes that the women who entered the rabbinate in the early years made choices based on different values such as family life and the ability to grow and sustain an intimate community for many years. Because of these different decisions, women redefined what it meant to be "a winner in the rabbinate." Gold added, "Sometimes, [being] a winner in the rabbinate [does not mean being] the biggest corporate rabbi there is."<sup>218</sup>

Rabbi Melanie Aron described her experience at CCAR conferences differently. She commented that the major change she noticed in conventions through the years was a diminishing of the grandeur of the rabbinate. She explained that there was a sense of honor granted to older generations (*gidul hador*) that she no longer sees in the rabbinate. "I certainly felt ... that awesomeness of some of the older teachers... That's changed for me. Part of it [is the] informality that has come in over the years, it reflects that I'm these people's colleague. I remember them when they were little *pischers*."<sup>219</sup> Aron comments that the great rabbis of her early days in the CCAR were those whose work she had studied and whose books she had read. She perceives that one of the changes since the emergence of women rabbis is the informalization of the rabbinate. Rabbi Sally Priesand echoed these sentiments:

I think that women have brought a new sense of partnership and networking to the rabbinate. I really think that even today there is a difference in the style of leadership that a woman has and that a man has. I've seen it and very often men... again, I don't like to make generalizations, but we know that studies have shown that women are more interested in networking and in relationships than in authority. I grew up when male rabbis were pretty much in charge; and in many congregations that rabbi would say, this is what we're going to do and the board would say fine thank you, and there wasn't really any discussion. I didn't want

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<sup>218</sup> Interview with Rabbi Rosalind A. Gold, January 28, 2010.

<sup>219</sup> Interview with Rabbi Melanie W. Aron, February 2, 2010.

to be that kind of rabbi; I wanted to make sure that I was certain that I was in partnership with the members of my congregation. I made that very clear at my first interview. I think that women have changed the rabbinate that way; I think they've also allowed men to be more nurturing openly. And also, women have.... At least I can speak for myself, I, my congregation, taught me that success didn't mean bigger. I don't know how it is now but when I was in rabbinic school the goal was always was to have an E congregation and there was almost a feeling that if at some point in your life, you didn't make it there, you were a failure. My congregation taught me that success doesn't mean bigger, it means [we] are we doing better today than we did yesterday. That, to me, is what success means. I think that women have made it more acceptable to choose to have a smaller congregation; at the same time if a woman wants a large congregation, there shouldn't be any barriers standing in the way.<sup>220</sup>

Rabbi Joan Friedman explained that, when she was ordained, there was a joke describing the conventions of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) as a place where men came to say "how big is yours?" She explains, "I think what women have brought to the rabbinate is that [size] is not the sole measure of success as a rabbi."<sup>221</sup> Friedman attributes this both to women's emergence in the rabbinate and the cultural changes furthered by feminism. She explained:

A lot of people in my generation and younger [believe] success [can be found in] reexamining the relationship between work and personal life and making choices that people conventionally identify as more feminist choices, choices that embody values that are associated with women, [for example,] personal relations over size.<sup>222</sup>

Friedman described a trend among men who choose smaller congregations for the intimacy of the congregation. She added: "On the other hand ... women have considered it something to celebrate when a woman is hired as a senior rabbi of a large congregation."<sup>223</sup> Friedman here argued that this measurement of success has not been altered as much as broadened to include other definitions as well as those related to size.

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<sup>220</sup> Interview with Rabbi Sally J. Priesand, February 18, 2010.

<sup>221</sup> Interview with Rabbi Joan S. Friedman, January 28, 2010.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

Almost unanimously, women expressed the sentiment that, in an all male rabbinate, professional success was measured by the size of one's congregation. Most spoke about this phenomenon in a negative way. Similarly, many women acknowledged the variety of career paths available to women in the rabbinate. Women spoke about the implications of this shift both in terms of big-picture ideas, such as a move from a front and center, single focus rabbinate to a more democratic, decentralized one, and in terms of the specific reasons for the new paths they sought to pursue, such as intimacy in relationships with congregants and balance between their personal and professional lives. Ultimately, while women perceived a change in the definition of from one based on congregational size, there was no consensus as to a new definition of success.

#### The New Success

Rabbi Jacqueline Koch Ellenson described "How Women Have Changed the Rabbinate" in her article *From the Personal to the Communal*. She explains: "Whereas earlier generations had looked at career advancement and success by counting congregational size, women began looking at success using other variables."<sup>224</sup> She lists forming non-hierarchical rabbinic leadership structures (such as co-rabbinates where two rabbis share equal power and prestige in a synagogue) and the ability to balance family life as the new criterion for measuring success. Interestingly, the women interviewed did not list these among their greatest successes in the rabbinates.

In the question of success in the rabbinate, there is no ultimate answer that defines how one can measure the success of a rabbi. Newsweek, in recent history, annually

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<sup>224</sup> Elyse Goldstein, *New Jewish Feminism: Probing the Past, Forging the Future*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Lights Publishing. 2008) P. 129

publishes a list of the 50 most influential rabbis of the year.<sup>225</sup> Among their criteria, they list the following:

- Are they known nationally/internationally?
- Do they have political/social influence?
- Do they have a media presence?
- Are they leaders within their communities?
- Are they considered leaders in Judaism or their movements?
- Size of their constituency
- Have they made an impact on Judaism in their career?
- Have they made a "greater" impact?

For Newsweek, size does matter, but it is not the only determinant in success.<sup>226</sup> While these lists present one view of a successful rabbinate, understanding how the pioneering women understood success in their own rabbinates is crucial to determining how these women might collectively define success. When asked what they felt was their greatest success, the rabbis interviewed spoke about that which was personally fulfilling in their professional lives. Finding satisfaction in their own values of success, women rabbis described success in regards to a capacity to strengthen congregations, inspiring individuals, longevity in service to congregations, and recognition by their peers.

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<sup>225</sup> "50 Influential Rabbis" from Newsweek Magazine. Accessed on 4/18/10 from <http://www.newsweek.com/id/192430>. The list was compiled by Michael Lynton, (chairman & CEO, Sony Pictures Entertainment), Gary Ginsberg, (executive VP, global marketing and corporate affairs, News Corp.) and Jay Sanderson, (CEO and executive producer, JTN/JTN Productions).

<sup>226</sup> In 2007, the first year that this list was published, among the few women listed was one of the pioneering women in the Reform rabbinate, Rabbi Janet Marder, ranking number 34. "Marder is the first woman to ever head the Central Conference of American Rabbis," described Newsweek. None of the rabbis ordained between 1972-1981 were listed in 2008, although Rabbi Marder received recognition on the list of top 25 influential congregational rabbis. This contest was judged by the following rabbinical traits: Ability to inspire congregation through scholarship and oratory, success in growing and expanding congregation, community leadership and innovation, ability to meet spiritual and personal needs and goals of his/her congregation, and leadership within denominational movement. Rabbi Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus came in at number 18 in 2009. Newsweek explained, "Dreyfus is the new head of the CCAR." Both Marder and Dreyfus were mentioned because of their leadership in the CCAR, a position to which they were elected by their peers.

### Longevity

Many rabbis considered longevity, the length of time spent serving a congregation, to be their greatest success. Rabbi Deborah Prinz explained that she considers simply being in the rabbinate for thirty years to be a success:

Being in congregational work for thirty years, given the challenges of women in the rabbinate in the very early stages, and having made a contribution in each of the settings where I was, to the growth and vitality of that community and having been able to work in partnership with lay people, and build a congregation programmatically and in some cases numerically and to be able to have also worked with colleagues in my leadership at CARR (Chicago Association of Reform Rabbis) and now the CCAR has been kind of amazing and wonderful.<sup>227</sup>

Prinz explained that more recently she has been able to develop new interests, including researching Jews and chocolate at the American Jewish Archives. “[It has been wonderful] to be able to reinvent myself toward the end of my career in very different kinds of work, using a different skill set... All of this is just great, wonderful, exciting, I’m proud of it.”<sup>228</sup> Rabbi Karen Fox expressed a similar sentiment. When asked about her greatest success, she replied, “I think staying in a large congregation for a long time, I’ve been here eighteen years. Having my work grow and develop, [building] long term relationships, and influencing the structure of Wilshire Blvd temple [have been my successes].”<sup>229</sup> Rabbi Myra Soifer also described her success in terms of longevity: “Twenty-five years in my congregation at Temple Sinai in Reno yielded all of the greatest successes. Touching people’s lives and being involved with them at their most intimate moments are far and away the most successes without any qualification.” Soifer explained that, during her tenure, “we doubled the size of the facility, [building] a congregation in Reno, Nevada that’s dynamic, fabulous, and wonderful.” Finally she

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<sup>227</sup> Interview with Rabbi Deborah Prinz, January 26, 2010.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Interview with Rabbi Karen L. Fox, February 9, 2010.

explains, “The last success of my congregational rabbinate, at least, will be... the success of my successor.”<sup>230</sup>

### Impacting Individuals

Debra Hachen was among those rabbis saw as their greatest success an ability to connect with individual congregants and to shape the direction of an entire congregation. As a congregational rabbi, she shared that her greatest success is found by helping people on their spiritual journeys: “I think my greatest success is... working with individual congregants on their own spiritual journeys. On a congregational level [it is] helping the congregation to vision and to be looking toward the future at what it could do for its members and for Judaism.”<sup>231</sup> Hachen continued:

My greatest accomplishment is that I survived the thirty years and had an influence on systems and on individual people hopefully brought people a little closer to thinking [of] themselves as spiritual and being about to talk about God and being able to see God as something in their lives... What they’ll say at my eulogy one day, I don’t know. Sometimes I joke [that] my biggest accomplishment was [helping a] homeless guy. He and his wife lived out of their car and I finally convinced them that they needed to move into an apartment. I got them their first and last month’s rent and so that they stopped living in their car.<sup>232</sup>

Hachen described the spiritual idea that after she dies, she, like others in traditional Jewish stories, will appear before God for judgment. She explained that she imagines that it will be this deed of helping a homeless family that will tip the scales towards a good afterlife.

Rabbi Elyse Frishman also described her success in terms of personal relationships. She explained, “My greatest success is getting people to move themselves to a place they never thought they’d arrive at that is transformational.” Frishman shared

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<sup>230</sup> Interview with Rabbi Myra Soifer, February 2, 2010.

<sup>231</sup> Interview with Rabbi Debra Hachen, February 4, 2010.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

that creating a new prayer book for the Reform Movement is one illustration of “getting that to happen” She described her role in the congregation as a guiding one, helping them to understand “what we do, how we’ve gotten to where we are, and what we continue to work on. I think that that’s something I’m good at doing.”<sup>233</sup>

### Transforming Congregations

Other rabbis, like Rabbi Joan Friedman, defined success in terms of the ability to transform a congregation. Friedman explained that her greatest success was, “turning that congregation into a really viable, vital exciting place. It had a lot of potential when I came as their first full time rabbi and it grew enormously and continued to grow.”<sup>234</sup>

“What I enjoy in the rabbinate is taking an idea and bringing it to fruition,” said Rabbi Melanie Aron. “Bringing this congregation from a sort of make-shift start-up to a congregation that is a significant player in the community [has been a success.]”<sup>235</sup>

Similarly, Rabbi Susan Talve shared that her greatest success has been creating a community which does not rely on its rabbi: “Creating this model of a community and having it be really lay led, joyful, and loving, and caring. The kind of community that we have been able to create definitely is professionally my greatest success.”<sup>236</sup>

### Teaching

Many rabbis felt that their greatest success was in their capacity to teach students of all ages and instilling in them a passion for learning about Judaism. Rabbi Janet Marder explained that she feels most successful in her rabbinate when she is teaching torah:

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<sup>233</sup> Interview with Rabbi Elyse D. Frishman, February 2, 2010.

<sup>234</sup> Interview with Rabbi Joan S. Friedman, January 28, 2010.

<sup>235</sup> Interview with Rabbi Melanie W. Aron, February 2, 2010.

<sup>236</sup> Interview with Rabbi Susan Talve, February 11, 2010.

Well, it may sound funny but one of the things I feel best about is Torah study, that there is a very large number of people with whom I get to study Torah every week. They take it seriously and value it and I partly like that I have managed to help them get engaged with Torah study and partly that they are observing Shabbat, that they come on Saturday morning and that it is a day set apart from them. I guess not related to my gender particularly. Becoming president of the CCAR, I don't think of as an achievement, I didn't do anything to earn it, I was invited to do it and I did it, but I don't feel like I, you know, you feel, you value accomplishments that you worked toward in some fashion.<sup>237</sup>

Rabbi Rosalind Gold shared:

I am a very good teacher and I believe that if I were to point to one thing in my rabbinate that I did that probably meant the most, oy, well, I'm going to stick with teacher and various aspects of teacher. My work with kids, particularly older kids, I was very successful in doing that and working with conversion students. I loved it. I loved that work. I miss that work actually. [My work] as a teacher was my greatest success.<sup>238</sup>

When asked what she felt was her greatest success as a rabbi, rabbi Susan Abramson replied, "Imbuing the kids with the positive sense of what it means to be Jewish:"

When a lot of families come to my temple, and they're trying to decide whether or not to join a temple or join our temple, I feel like I have to undo a whole generation of people who had negative experiences in synagogue. When I was in religious school it was so boring and I hated the rabbi and we had this bad experience almost all the time. The same families almost all the time I convince them to join and they join and I watch their kids grow up and I see them have a mostly positive experience and I know they're not going to have the same feeling that their parents have. So I think that that's probably my biggest success and the books have kind of made me even more of a celebrity with the kids and so I think that helps shape their identity of that Jewish part of them as well.<sup>239</sup>

Rabbi Leah Kroll explained that her greatest success was in getting kids to love learning about Judaism:

I worked as a day school educator for the greater part of twenty-five years and I was also a social-action rabbi. I think my greatest success.... And I was a very creative programmer. I got kids to love learning Jewish texts and I also did cross-departmental programming. I got science teachers and math teachers and humanities teachers to work with Jewish study teachers on amazing, amazing

<sup>237</sup> Interview with Rabbi Janet Ross Marder, February 2, 2010.

<sup>238</sup> Interview with Rabbi Rosalind A. Gold, January 28, 2010.

<sup>239</sup> Interview with Rabbi Susan Abramson, January 28, 2010.

programs. And I got kids to believe that they could make a difference, won a Fame Award for social action programs that involved 100's of children over the years doing amazing things. I think that was my great contribution. It was as a rabbi-educator. And I got kids to care. I got kids to care about being Jewish. I think that was my greatest contribution. I always believed that change was possible. I saw it happen in my lifetime. But I got kids to believe that they mattered and that Judaism could matter to them.<sup>240</sup>

Rabbi Mindy Portnoy listed a variety of elements of her rabbinate she found successful, but ultimately focused on teaching as well.

My greatest success...[is] my adult bat and bar mitzvah classes. I love those people, they're like the one thing I still love and don't get bored doing. The idea that education and bringing people more knowledge about Judaism is really what matters to me; and that's been a real success. It's created a whole cadre of people in my temple who are very connected, very involved. So that's something that really matters to me.<sup>241</sup>

### Conclusion

While the pioneering women mentioned longevity, inspiring individuals, transforming congregations, and teaching as indicators of their personal success, none adequately defines the entirety of professional success of a rabbi. Rather, I would argue that the answers of these women show that a personal connection to the rabbinate and a passion for whatever it is that allows an individual rabbi to thrive, seem to be the key to career success. Those rabbis energized by relationships found success in longevity, those energized by tradition found success in teaching. To define success in the rabbimates of these women would require an adaptable and broad definition.

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<sup>240</sup> Interview with Rabbi Leah Kroll, February 17, 2010.

<sup>241</sup> Interview with Rabbi Mindy Avra Portnoy, February 9, 2010.

## CONCLUSION

The pioneering women in the Reform rabbinate, those women ordained between 1972-1981, have broadened the understanding of what it means to be a rabbi. They altered the physical image of the rabbinate, diversifying what a rabbi could look like. They contributed a unique voice, shaping liturgy and ritual. While the emergence of women in the rabbinate was not the only factor that led to change in the rabbinate,<sup>242</sup> without this factor, the rabbinate could not look as it does today.

Recording the experiences of the pioneering women in the rabbinate preserves their experiences as part of the history of Reform Judaism in America. Evaluating and analyzing these experiences allows us to learn how and why women participated in the changing of the rabbinate and how they perceived their experiences in retrospect. The pioneering women in the rabbinate shared the sentiment that their appearance mattered to congregants, that they thoughtfully considered what women rabbis might look like, and that through their choices, they broadened the possibilities for what rabbis, both male and female, could wear on and off the bima. The women interviewed for this thesis unanimously identified as feminists and yet their descriptions of what this meant varied drastically. The spoke of shared feelings of pressure to represent their gender and a desire not to be stereotyped by that gender. The pioneering women shared an understanding that the rabbinate had changed as a result of their emergence within it, and that the thrust of that change was found in the redefinition of success. No longer was it solely the size that mattered, but a variety of factors contributed to how successful a rabbi's career had been. Ultimately, what these women have shown is an expanding range of possibilities in the

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<sup>242</sup> Others include the rise of the camping movement and the effects of the civil rights movement on Judaism.

rabbinate, from the basics of what rabbis look and sound like to the varied career paths possible and respectable in the rabbinate today.

Recognizing those characteristics and skills unique to the pioneering women in the rabbinate allows for an understanding of whether it was these women who were able to enact change, whether it is women in general (or an interplay between genders) that bring about change, or whether the addition of a new perspective in the rabbinate that allowed for change. Further analysis of the data collected for this thesis could focus on the characteristics women perceived helped them succeed in the rabbinate. Data was also collected on the ways in which rabbis felt that being a woman facilitated their success and created challenges in their rabbinate, what aspect of the rabbinate they most enjoyed, and the advice these women would give to future rabbis. In addition, the questions discussed in this thesis yielded responses that could not be analyzed within, such as the experience of two of the rabbis interviewed who had authored children's books featuring women rabbis. Further analysis of the interviews recorded for this thesis would undoubtedly yield additional conclusions about the experience of these women.

One can look at the experience of women in the rabbinate today with pride for the amount accomplished in the short period of time during which women have been present in the rabbinate or with dismay at the amount still to be done. From the ordination of the first woman until today, there have been changes to the rights of women and men in the rabbinate regarding an equalization of pay, family leave, and laws prohibiting sexual harassment. Women serve as senior rabbis in large congregations, as the president of the CCAR as well as other organizations, and are regional leaders within Judaism as well as within the larger community. However, there is still discussion as to whether or not

women are granted the same opportunities as men. The majority of senior rabbis in large congregations are men and the majority of graduating rabbinical students matched with congregations are men.<sup>243</sup> There may still be an inequality between the experiences of men and women in the rabbinate.

As women become equal to men in numbers in the active rabbinate, or potentially surpass their numbers, the story of women in the rabbinate will undoubtedly continue to evolve. The stories of these women show that the ordination of the first women did not halt the process of struggling to define the role and understanding of women in the rabbinate. The experiences of the women ordained in this first decade demonstrate the negotiation of those expectations and their implications for the pioneering women in the rabbinate, a process which may continue long into the future.

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<sup>243</sup> In 2010, the first round of placement for rabbinical students yielded jobs for 6 men and 3 women.

**APPENDIX A****Interview Questions:**

**When did you first think about becoming a rabbi?**

**How do you define feminism? Do you consider yourself as a feminist?**

**Has that definition changed through your experience in the rabbinate?**

**What role did being a woman play in your rabbinate?**

**How did your gender affect your liturgical choices and sermons?**

**Did you introduce any women's rituals in your rabbinate?**

**Were you conscious of making any other choices in your rabbinate based on your gender?**

**What pressures were unique to you as a pioneer?**

**How have they changed?**

**Were you conscious of a changing rabbinate by virtue of your presence in it?**

**Were you, in your rabbinate, conscious of changes occurring to the rabbinate as a whole?**

**What role do you believe that women had in the changing of the rabbinate?**

**Joy Levitt (RRC 81), wrote an article describing two models for women in the rabbinate: Navy Blue Suit, a rabbi who saw herself as the same as a male, and the Goddess, a rabbi who saw herself as the absolute opposite of a male. If that is a continuum, can you place yourself on it?**

**What challenges did you face in creating your "superficial" rabbinic image?**

**Did you model yourself more like professional women or rabbinical men?**

**Do you have any stories about people commenting the way you looked?**

**Anything inappropriate?**

**Has the picture of the woman rabbi changed over the course of your rabbinate?**

**What assumptions were (and are) made about you as a female rabbi?**

**As a pioneer woman rabbi to you feel like you were part of the group that shaped the image of the future female rabbi?**

**What do you feel was your greatest success as a rabbi?**

**What are the ways in which being a woman facilitated your success?**

**What did you feel were the greatest challenges to you as a woman rabbi?**

**Would you consider your experience in the rabbinate more positive or negative?**

**What aspect of the rabbinate do you enjoy the most?**

**What is it about you that made you able to succeed as a pioneer woman rabbi?**

**What advice do you have for future rabbis?**

**RABBIS BY YEAR OF ORDINATION**

## Ordained 1972

\*Rabbi Sally J. Priesand, 1972

## Ordained 1975

Rabbi Michal Bernstein, 1975

## Ordained 1976

\*Rabbi Laura J. Geller, 1976

## Ordained 1978

\*Rabbi Karen L. Fox, 1978

\*Rabbi Rosalind A. Gold, 1978

\*Rabbi Deborah Prinz, 1978

\*Rabbi Myra Soifer, 1978

## Ordained 1979

\*Rabbi Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus,  
1979

Rabbi Vicki L. Hollander, 1979

Rabbi Beverly W. Magidson, 1979

\*Rabbi R Janet Ross Marder, 1979

Rabbi Sheila C. Russian, 1979

Rabbi Bonnie Ann Steinberg, 1979

## Ordained 1980

Rabbi Aliza S. Berk, 1980

\*Rabbi Cathy L. Felix, 1980

\*Rabbi Joan S. Friedman, 1980

\*Rabbi Debra Hachen, 1980

\*Rabbi Ellen Jay Lewis, 1980

Rabbi Judith S. Lewis, 1980

\*Rabbi Mindy Avra Portnoy, 1980

## Ordained 1981

\*Rabbi Susan Abramson, 1981

\*Rabbi Melanie W. Aron, 1981

\*Rabbi Helene Ferris, 1981

\*Rabbi Elyse D. Frishman, 1981

\*Rabbi Leah Kroll, 1981

Rabbi Lynne Landsberg, 1981

Rabbi Sara Berman, 1981

Rabbi Elizabeth Rolle, 1981

Rabbi Laurie Rutenberg, 1981

Rabbi Kinneret L. Shiryon, 1981

Rabbi Karen A. Soria, 1981

\*Rabbi Susan Talve, 1981

**\* indicates interview conducted for thesis**

**APPENDIX B: Transcripts****Interviewer: Emily Huebscher, 5<sup>th</sup> year student HUC****With: Rabbi Susan Abramson, 1981****Date: January 28, 2010**

Susan Abramson: Hello.

Emily Huebscher: Hi, Rabbi Abramson?

Susan Abramson: Yep.

Emily Huebscher: Hi, It's Emily Huebscher

Susan Abramson: Oh, hi, how are you?

Emily Huebscher: Good, how are you?

Susan Abramson: Good.

Emily Huebscher: Sorry, I tried to call your work number first and left you a message there.

Susan Abramson: Oh, ok, I'm hardly ever there.

Emily Huebscher: I just wanted to remind you that I'm recording this conversation for the American Jewish Archives.

Susan Abramson: OK.

Emily Huebscher: OK, How are you doing?

Susan Abramson: Good, how are you doing?

Emily Huebscher: Good, good, yeah, I grew up in Lexington, right next door.

Susan Abramson: Oh awesome, I bet you probably know some people from my temple but I'm not sure who... if you were involved in Lefty.

Emily Huebscher: I was, and with Nifty.

Susan Abramson: Yeah, and Nifty

Emily Huebscher: Thanks so much for agreeing to talk with me. I want to start out just by asking about when you first thought about becoming a rabbi.

Susan Abramson: It was probably late high school or when I was an undergrad. I never had a *bat mitzvah* because my parents wanted me to have some sort of a Jewish background but I never went to Hebrew School or anything at that time. I grew up at Temple Israel in Boston and there were like two tracks, there was the Sunday school track and the Hebrew School track so I just went to the Sunday school part on Sundays and that was as much as they felt that I needed quote unquote. So I didn't grow up with much of a Jewish background so being a rabbi was the furthest thing from my mind when I was growing up. And then, what happened was that all of my friends became bar and bat mitzvah and I didn't and they all had to sign a contract at Temple Israel at the time saying they would continue through confirmation class and I had kind of missed out of the social scene with the bar/bat mitzvah section of my life. So I didn't want to be left out. I wanted to be with my friends as they did confirmation so I decided to do it of my own volition. And then I just decided that this was something that since my parents weren't making me, that I wanted to do it myself. I got very involved with the confirmation class and the youth group and became vice president of Rifty. Very involved in organizing programs and liturgical kinds of things. While everybody else was kind of rebelling against it, I was moving further into it. Rabbi Gittleson was the rabbi then. He was my rabbi growing up and he authored of many books. I always wanted to be an author; I always wanted to be a writer when I was growing up. And he was also very against the Vietnam War and I shared those political opinions, which my parents didn't, so I

kind of saw him as a major role model. Even though I got really involved in the youth group and confirmation and post-confirmation, I still kind of never, never thought I could be a rabbi, not because of the female thing but more because I never had a *bat mitzvah*, I didn't know Hebrew, but then I went to Brandeis right afterwards and kind of the whole realm of possibility opened up. And the Hillel Rabbi Al Axelrad was very encouraging and suggested that I think about it. And I began to take Hebrew and majored in Judaic studies got involved in Hillel there and kind of moved into that.

Emily Huebscher: I read that you were the first woman Hillel president at Brandeis.

Susan Abramson: I wasn't the first woman; I might have been one of the first, but I wasn't the first. Actually Beverly Magidson I believe she was president of Hillel a couple of years before me.

Emily Huebscher: Oh, ok. You can't trust what you read I guess. I had read that but I guess it wasn't accurate.

Susan Abramson: Yeah.

Emily Huebscher: So I'm curious to know what you thought the role that being a woman played in your rabbinate?

Susan Abramson: You mean throughout my rabbinate? This is just my perception; it might not be accurate. But my perception is that sometimes women tend to be more inclusive and more empowering of others than at least what I saw as like the traditional kind of male model of the rabbinate. So from the very beginning... my first position I was an assistant rabbi in a very large congregation in Philadelphia. But since I came to Burlington, I just saw my role as a leader was to try to lift everybody else up as opposed to the one kind of preaching to people and being the dominate member of the community. So for example in our services when people would come in for services I would ask them if they would like to lead a little part of the service so at most of our services like people stand up and read different parts of service as opposed to my quote unquote leading the service from the front of the room, and I try to have the kids come up onto the *bima* as often as possible, open our curtain or walk around with the Torah, do the *motzi*, try to get other people to.... I don't preach, I lead discussions and try to get everybody involved interactively as opposed to speaking to people. We have a small congregation, we don't have a staff, so I just kind of see my role as a rabbi to get people to take on positions of responsibility, to help to lead the congregation, and to help to do the programming of the congregation and that's the way to get them to really feel invested not only in the congregation but in their own sense of Judaism.

Emily Huebscher: Do you consider yourself a feminist? And how do you define feminism?

Susan Abramson: I never considered myself... well I consider myself a feminist in terms of my feeling like women should feel completely equal to men in every realm of life, but I never approached the rabbinate as something that I was doing to make a feminist statement. When I was growing up I always felt like I could achieve whatever I wanted to if I had the abilities to do it and it had nothing at all to do with my gender. So when I started to consider becoming a rabbi, it really didn't cross my mind that there weren't any women rabbis at the time. It was something that I felt like I wanted to aspire towards as a person and I wanted to emulate what I saw my rabbi doing and I just found that very fulfilling being able to work with people at all different stages of life and engendering community but I did not think of it at all as something that I was going to be a pioneer doing or ground breaking or that I wanted to knock down some barrier or anything and I actually kind of even was upset

when people would put that on me. I always just wanted to be a rabbi and not a woman rabbi. Of course no one else was ready to do that and even to this day many people when I first came to my congregation every time I walked into the sanctuary for a bar or bat mitzvah I would hear everybody whispering oh, it's the woman rabbi or people would always ask, still to this day people ask me oh you must know so and so who is also a woman rabbi. I just wanted to downplay the woman part of it and just be a rabbi. So feminism to me means that women should have the ability to do whatever they aspire to, but just to be able to work in the field that we want to without being labeled by our gender.

Emily Huebscher: So has that definition changed through your experience in the rabbinate?

Susan Abramson: Well, Yeah, so, in the beginning at HUC I never felt there was any issue at all between the males and the females in Rabbinical school but once we stepped out of the building... the women in my class were always... like I was asked to speak a lot about what it was like to be a woman rabbi or what it was like to be a woman rabbinical student so I think there was like a little bit of resentment on the part of the men in the class that the women were getting all of these speaking engagements that they weren't getting. And in my first congregation there were really pretty big problems because I was a woman. That was the place where I experienced the issue the most because I was in a suburban, fairly wealthy, suburban-Philadelphia congregation and a lot of the women, I think that because it was an upper class community a lot of the women didn't work at the time. And so first of all I remember the second or third service that I conducted somebody came up to me at the end of the service and said that the only thing he noticed about me during those three services was that I had worn the same shoes at all three services And that people were very focused on my appearance and on what I was wearing and my senior rabbi would always come to the Temple wearing these schlumpy sweaters and everything and he prided himself on really dressing down and wearing very kind of yucky-looking clothes and I would come wearing like a suit everyday, like a skirt suit. And on my evaluation when the board or a representative of the board had his evaluation with me that my appearance was an issue for people because I wasn't dressed in the manner of a main-line woman and I didn't really wear much makeup and my hair wasn't really styled or anything which was an important thing for women in that area. One woman caught me in the hall one day and said, my daughter wanted you to officiate at her wedding "so I said great", and I [the woman] told her [the daughter] how could I have her officiate at her wedding because we are going to have 200 people there and I would have to explain to all 200 people why you were a rabbi and isn't that crazy that she wanted you to officiate at her wedding. Some guy grabbed me after his son's bar mitzvah and like kissed me and said, Oh, I never kissed a rabbi before. [laughter] And when my senior rabbi would be away on vacation or a trip and I would be the only rabbi on the staff and there would be a funeral, I would never be asked to do a funeral so finally we began to ask why aren't people asking me to officiate. And the answer was that a lot of families feel they need like that father figure at that time in their lives so the families would often like find a male rabbi from the funeral home even if they were members of the Temple instead of asking me. But then the positive part of the review was always, oh, you work so well with the children, I was youth group advisor, and they said, oh the kids love you, it was kind of like a self-fulfilling prophesy that this was the area that you would excel in being female. That was 1981 to 1983. When I first came to Burlington in 1984, when I first came to Burlington it was way, way better. There were a couple of families at the Temple, one family the same thing with the wedding, their son was getting married and they found a male

rabbi because they needed a quote unquote real rabbi to officiate at the wedding. There were a couple of families that just never accepted me as a rabbi but over the years when I was walking in for a bar mitzvah or people would see me for the first time there would be like all that whispering. But over the years it really changed dramatically.

Emily Huebscher: How?

Susan Abramson: Well the kids in the religious school grow up only knowing that women could be rabbis, not men. Well people would start to tell me when their kids went to a *bar mitzvah* someplace else, they would ask what is that man doing up there officiating. I thought that only women could be rabbis. The more women became rabbis there's really no whispering going on any more when I walk into a room. I think one of my strength-areas is life-cycle officiating. So people kind of almost like seek me out to do funerals now. One of the more interesting things is that I don't yet officiate at mixed marriages, but over the years many people would call assuming that I did because I was female. For some reason they would think I was be more quote unquote liberal because I'm female. And would always be kind of surprise when I explained that I never have and I may in the future but not yet. The life-cycle types of things I really think that perception has changed now from that you need the father comforting-figure in a time to death to you need a compassionate person to help you at the moment in your life.

I never had any female role models obviously when I was going through the rabbinate. So, when I came to my synagogue I was single and people would try to fix me up with people as they would with a male rabbi too. But then I got married. I think that because I was female and because a lot of the people who were the most active in the congregation were also female, we had this maybe a little more of a closer more friend-like relationship than if I had been male. So I got married and ..I was always available to people and I was too available to people in some senses so when I got married there was a little bit of resentment that I wasn't available 24/7 to kind of talk on whatever level anybody wanted to talk to me or at any time. And when my son was born it was a major, major problem because I didn't realize it but I kind of let people in too close during the whole pregnancy thing. I would tell people how it was going people would always be asking and I would be telling them and about comparing experiences and then when my son was born I was 41 when he was born and it was kind of a high-risk pregnancy and everything. Also there were a couple of times that people wanted me to do baby-namings for other people and I was on bed rest for part of the time and they just like didn't get it that it would be dangerous for me to do that. So after my son was born and I went on maternity for 3 months and I came back and the day I came back the president met me in the parking lot and told me that people were out to get me and that my job was in danger. Turns out that all those people who I had let into my life a little too close became very, very angry that I had now pushed them away because I wanted my private time with my son right after he was born. There was a huge, huge fight at the Temple and obviously I kept my job but there was a lot of resentment, a lot of anger and that got repeated when my son went from nursery school to kindergarten and I had to change my schedule to accommodate his schedule another huge fight at the temple nearly lost my job again a whole group left the temple because they felt that I wasn't as available to them as they needed me to be and or I pulled back my quote unquote friendship a little bit with them. Those were some hard lessons I learned through my own personal life cycle transitions. That's part of who I am and that's probably always a problem I will have kind of befriending people a little bit

too much instead of maintaining a sort of congregant-rabbi boundary. But anyway, things are way, way better now, but if I had had somebody like me, who had gone through this, I would have greatly benefited from that advice from other's experiences of how to deal with those kinds of situations?

Emily Huebscher: How did being a woman affect your liturgical choices and sermon topics?

Susan Abramson: We began changing the male pronouns in services way before the Gates of Grey there. And I simply never really gave sermons. The only time I really give sermons are on the High Holidays. I never gave sermons, they're always discussions or teachings or something that people can respond to.

Emily Huebscher: Did your gender play a role in any of the choices that you made with things that you said on/from the *bima*?

Susan Abramson: I would talk about issues or whatever partly from a female perspective. Again, I don't know at what point whatever I said would be female or just me personally or if I were male if I would say the same thing, it's kind of hard to tell. I think being a compassionate person or being somebody who tries to be in tune with other people I don't know how much of that is female how much of that is being a unique individual, it's kind of hard to say.

Emily Huebscher: Were you conscious of making any other choices in your rabbinate based on being a woman?

Susan Abramson: I don't think so, I think I pretty much told you the whole saga of all those choices I made, and that they were good and that I have a special bond with my congregants and bad in terms of people ending up feeling rejected because I tend to be a little bit too close to them.

Emily Huebscher: Were you conscious of changes going on in the rabbinate as a whole?

Susan Abramson: Yeah, certainly not year to year but over the decades, it's amazing to go to CCAR conventions and see all the women there, which was just wonderful.

Actually, one of the little stories, when I first went to my Philadelphia Board of Rabbis meeting, and they introduced all the new rabbis and since my last name begins with A, I was the first one called on and so I stood up and everybody kind of like nodded at me, everybody meaning like there were only men, one of my classmates and I were the only two women in the room, and then they said the name of the next person and he stood up and everybody clapped and like all the other men, when everybody else stood up they clapped And everybody was looking at me like I had two heads. So that's another little... and now whenever I go to a Mass Board of Rabbis meeting or whatever almost, about half the people in the room are women so that's obviously a huge change. I think because there are so many women now in the rabbinate that when people come to my synagogue or my congregants go other place are likely to see a woman in that position it just enables the acceptance to be all that more complete. I think it's enabled all of us to be less of a quote unquote woman rabbi and just a rabbi.

Emily Huebscher: What pressures do you think were unique to you as a pioneer?

Susan Abramson: I think I told you a lot of them. I think just having to break down barriers. Just another little example, that whenever somebody would call the Temple and I would answer the phone, they would never assume that I was the rabbi so there was like constant surprise when they would ask to speak to the rabbi and I would say that's me. Every single time the phone would ring that little scenario was repeated. I think I have pretty much told you all those other pioneer-type problems.

Emily Huebscher: Were you aware of changes in the general rabbinate during the emergence of women in the rabbinate?

Susan Abramson: The influx of women in the rabbinate have resulted the creation of different types of liturgy and just kind of a... just a feeling that I was a little bit more comfortable with, not being like an all boys club. I just felt like I could connect to other people better. Other than that... I'll just speak for myself, being a rabbi in a small congregation I kind of feel pretty isolated in the rabbinate. I think the people I'm closest to clergy-wise, are the other ministers in town. So, I'm not really overly affected by things that are happening in the rabbinate as a whole because I'm really not that much connected or in touch with others.

Emily Huebscher: So you talked a little bit before about the image of the rabbi how you dressed and spoke and behaved and you mentioned some of the assumptions that were made about you as a female rabbi, can you think of any others that you haven't mentioned?

Susan Abramson: Uh... let's see... I think that's pretty much it, the only thing I can think of is that when I was in Philadelphia we wore robes when we conducted services so it all the more surprising that people would be focused on what I was wearing. When I came to my congregation in Burlington, I was the first full time rabbi but the whole idea of a robe was kind of funny and I never wore one there except on the High Holidays. There was always one or two guys in the congregation who said they would prefer that I wore a robe to kind of like... so they could see me more neutral up there than female. Also actually when I say up there I think that another thing that I did which might be a little bit of a female side, is when I'd see that our service was on a smaller side I would just have everybody move their chairs in a circle than have me up on the *bima*. And those are by far I feel were the nicest services when everybody could sit in a circle there's more of a sense of community. There have been a couple of men on the religious and ritual committee who've always been in favor of getting these pew-like chairs so everybody could face forward. But I've always tried to circle, to put everybody in a circle.

I don't know if you've ever been in my synagogue, but our *bima* is just two steps above everybody else but I also, whenever I speak I try to be not behind a lectern and just be with the congregation and also whenever we have a bar or bat mitzvah I basically have them conduct the entire service. I just jump in there to speak to them and I speak to them personally again, as opposed to giving a sermon. Whatever I say on those occasions is always completely focused on them and then tying it into the Torah portion or *haftorah* portions. So everybody can learn a little something, but I'm very, very focused on them. I also think that I... I am extremely child focused and I don't know if that's part of being female or just again because of who I am but I've started a ton of child-related programs in our synagogue from birth up. One of my missions as a rabbi is for children to grow up feeling a positive sense of their Jewish identity and feeling that the synagogue is like their second home. So I think that... maybe... I can't compare myself as a male and a female so it's hard to say.

Emily Huebscher: I read this article by Joy Levette who wrote about the different models that women used in their rabbinate in terms of image, so she writes about this navy blue-suit model who is a rabbi who sort of models herself after the males and then this sort of goddess rabbi who is just totally opposite of that. If this is a continuum, can you place yourself on that.

Susan Abramson: Yeah, I'm more of the suit type than the goddess type, that's just who I am. Yeah. I always wear a suit at services, like a skirt suit. I'm actually a little bit

more... I'm very, very informal, actually. The only time I wear a suit is only for services. I'm usually dressed very casually. I'm more of the sweater and jeans type of rabbi. I'm just a very informal person and over the years I think my dress has change, has evolved actually.  
Yeah

Emily Huebscher: How so?

Susan Abramson: When I first came I would always wear dresses or suits like every day to the Temple then as society changed and everybody got a little bit more informal so did I. I think that over the course of time I started wearing nice pants and a sweater, which I prefer to wear just generally and now I've kind of evolved to the jeans and sweater look. And nobody seems to mind and that's fine with me. And actually, another thing is I'm known for my socks. I'm always at religious school and I always like to find ways to connect with the kids. So I started wearing these crazy socks. So whenever I go to religious school the kids are always like really interested to see what kind of socks I'm wearing like my Chanukah socks and different holiday types of sock so that's kind of a fun thing. And other thing is the books I wrote. One of the reasons I wrote them because I felt it was important for kids to have a literary model of a woman rabbi in the books that they were reading to learn about Judaism so... and I'm wearing leotards there. [laughter] Did you get them?

Emily Huebscher: Yeah, they were really interesting. I thought it was interesting how you wrote how it was important to you to have a rabbi mom in the books.

Susan Abramson: Yeah, It's basically my family made into super heroes. I wanted it to be a little bit of a historical record for my son, of our family. I just wanted people to see that rabbis, women rabbis are real people. They could connect to rabbis as women in familial types of roles as well, ...and not to have to put anybody on a pedestal. When I was growing up my rabbi was on this huge, huge pedestal. And that's... I kind of learned how to be a rabbi trying to emulate some of what he did but also learning what I didn't want to do. And one thing I didn't want to do is to be so disconnected from the members of the temple, that either no relationship with them at all. I wanted to be very, very approachable.

Emily Huebscher: In developing your own image do you feel you shaped how future rabbis were able to develop their images as female rabbis.

Susan Abramson: I do feel like I'm kind of like isolated from other people, so I don't know that anybody ever sees me.

Emily Huebscher: I mean like at CCAR conventions.

Susan Abramson: Maybe. Those are such short periods of time. I've been to a couple of WRN conventions but everybody seems to be kind of dressed and appear in a similar, informal manner. I don't know that I've really been able to shape or influence any other women. Hopefully I'll have that opportunity if somebody from my temple becomes a rabbi.

Emily Huebscher: Were you conscientious of how you chose to dress or speak or behave in general as a female rabbi?

Susan Abramson: It's taken me a long time to learn how much of a symbol that I am for people, because I've always has gone under the assumption that I'm just me. But it's become quite clear that I'm not; I represent something very spiritual and very important and people project a tremendous amount onto me, everything from knowledge to morals to just being a representative of Judaism. Rabbis are very, very powerful symbolic exemplars for people. So that's a little bit hard for me to kind of quote unquote act like the symbolic exemplar as opposed to just acting naturally. And I think the best thing to do is to act like

yourself but I've also realized that there has to be that little bit of acknowledgement that people look to me to act a certain way because they project onto me that I have this font of knowledge or wisdom.

So often people of mixed marriages, ... I got an email like this yesterday, somebody wrote me a long email, he and his wife are in a mixed marriage and they are trying to decide what kind of religion to have in their household and they're pregnant with their first child. And he wrote me this really long letter, kind of embarrassed and not even wanting to speak to me because he didn't know if I would accept them or allow them to come to services and there was so much fear that I just realize I have to deal with them like extra gently just using the authority they are bestowing upon me to tell them that everything is fine and just come and meet with me and you'll see that we're completely accepting and all that. I just feel like I have to be careful in how I deal with people because they project so much on to me. And I have also learned over the years that everybody is projecting something onto me and some people automatically like love me just because I am a rabbi without knowing who I am and some people are automatically going to hate me because of what they are projecting on me and most of the people fall somewhere in the middle. And I have to always be conscious of all that. But I don't know if that has to do with my.. Part of people's projections probably have to do with my being female, I'm sure it does; but it's hard to know what part that is.

Emily Huebscher: You told me some stories about people commenting on your image, do you have any others you want to share?

Susan Abramson: The big thing was that when I wanted to become a rabbi it was right before Sally Priesand was ordained and I went to talk to my rabbi about it and he was not encouraging at all of my becoming a rabbi. He said that he didn't want to go through 5 years of rabbinical school and not to be able to find a job after that and he didn't know if people would accept me blah, blah, blah. And so I said, that's ridiculous of course; people are going to accept me. I had never experienced any inequality so I'm just going to do it. He was not encouraging at all for that reason. I can't imagine today anybody even thinking that. So, it was a very, very different time. At Brandeis I was the head of the pre-rabbi group and most of the people in it were women. So even at that time, a lot of women kind of were growing up with the same feeling about their ability to move into this area as well as others. Actually, there were some women at Brandeis who wanted to become Conservative Rabbis and the conservative moment was not accepting women into the rabbinical program at that time so I really gave them a lot of credit because they went to JTS anyway in the hopes that eventually JTS would change its mind, which it did.

But anyway it was interesting that at that time, our mindset was that we were not doing this because we're making some huge feminist statement, we're just doing this because there's no reason why we can't pursue the career of our choice and this is what we choose.

Emily Huebscher: So I want to move on to the professional realities of the female rabbi and I was wondering if you could identify some of the ways in which being a woman facilitated your success?

Susan Abramson: Yeah, I think in the same way that it nearly destroyed my rabbinate, it's the two sides of the coin. I think because I... Like families.. like I kind of become a part of their families too. Again, with all these questions it's hard to know what part of it is just my personality and which part is being female. I really think it's hard to make that distinction but whenever a family works with me because their son or daughter is becoming a bar or bat mitzvah or baby naming or any life cycle event, I think I get... I'm

able to connect with them on a certain level, that we're all going through this together and we're all going through this process together and I feel like that has enabled me to be successful because people feel close to me.

And now it's wonderful that in my religious school now there are a couple of kids whose parents I *bar* and *bat mitzvah*'d and so they just feel like I'm a part of their multi-generational family. I have a couple of weddings coming up of people who's *bar/bat mitzvah* I officiated at. It's that sense of closeness and connection which made some people who had their own emotional issues offended when I pulled back, on the other side of the coin it's what enables me to have that relationship with my temple members. So that there isn't that these are my office hours or you can call me between this time and this time. And you'll only see me at this time or this time, it's much more free flowing than that. Which is not really not the best way to be personally, because there's always the tension with people thinking I'm not available enough because I've given them the impressions... because I haven't set the boundaries and I think that probably somewhat of a female thing.

Emily Huebscher: What do you feel the greatest challenges were to you because of your gender?

Susan Abramson: Those same ones. Not setting the boundaries and enabling people to feel like I'm always available to them and when I needed to for personal reasons stepping back and them feeling that the stepping back was a rejection, as opposed to just needing to step back for personal reasons.

Emily Huebscher: Would you consider your experiences in the rabbinate more positive or more negative?

Susan Abramson: It depends on when you ask me. Right now I'd say they're more positive. The other interesting dynamic is that there are sometimes when the women leadership in the temple can be my best friends or biggest allies and they're other times they can be my worst nightmare. Because if there's like a women who's like a president or in a leadership position on some committee who is also a very strong personality who feels like they want things their way, there can be that female vs. ...you know a little bit too close, there can be a sort of like collision of personalities and there certainly can be with males too but it's like a little bit different. What was the question?

So right now, people aren't going to be hearing this right except for the American Jewish Archives. My president... I'm at the end of the second year of the current president and like last year we were at each other's throats because she wanted things her way and I didn't agree and she didn't have the experience and wasn't trusting my experience but then she's kind of changed and kind of mellowed so last year was hard and this year has been great. So right now things have been good but if you'd asked me last year I'm not sure what I would have said.

I wouldn't have been here almost 26 years if things weren't mostly good. With the kids, things are always good, and with the *b'nai mitzvah*.... It's the politics that's always a challenge with somebody or other. But in terms of my relationships with almost all the families and all the kids, it's been very good.

Emily Huebscher: What do you feel was your greatest success as a rabbi?

Susan Abramson: I think it's imbuing the kids with the positive sense of what it means to be Jewish. When a lot of families come to my temple, and they're trying to decide

whether or not to join a temple or whether join our temple, I feel like I have to undo a whole generation of people who had negative Jewish experiences in synagogues. When I was in religious school it was so boring or I hated the rabbi and we had this bad experience almost all the time. The same families almost all the time like I convince them to join and they join and I watch their kids grow up and those kids have generally a positive experience and I know they're not going to have the same feeling that their parents have. So I think that that's probably my biggest success and the books have kind of made me even more of a celebrity with the kids and so I think that helps shape their identity of that Jewish part of them as well.

Emily Huebscher: What aspect of the rabbinate do you enjoy the most?

Susan Abramson: Working with the kids I guess.

Emily Huebscher: So, thinking back, what do you think it was about you that made you able to succeed as a pioneer rabbi?

Susan Abramson: As I said, the ability to connect with people on an informal kind of level, and to be with people and show them that I could help them through life and make Judaism, make their Jewish experience joyous in good times, and be creative also in terms of holiday celebrations, think outside the box, but I never saw myself as a pioneer rabbi I want that in there. As I said, I happen to be in that first generation of female rabbis, but I couldn't care less about that, and to me that doesn't mean anything. I just wanted to be a rabbi. It just so happens that there weren't others in my gender that were rabbis or not many.

Emily Huebscher: And what advice do you have for future rabbis?

Susan Abramson: Future female rabbis?

Emily Huebscher: Rabbis in general, both.

Susan Abramson: I think it's important to recognize how much of a symbol you are to people and it's important to recognize how different people are going to project their own needs on to you so people see you very, very differently depending on who they are. And also how much your relationship with them can impact your ability to be a rabbi particularly when you're going through different life cycle events yourself. So being a mother and a rabbi is going to drastically change your relationship with your congregants whether you want it to or not. And just to be conscious of that but also, to set the boundaries with people so that when your life changes in different ways it doesn't so much impact your relationship with them. And on the flip side, I know that this has been a challenge for other women as well as me, is to be able to be there for your family enough and not to have your congregation totally consume your life. Because it's so easy when you're a congregational rabbi for you to be a congregational rabbi 24/7 and you have to set limits on that for the sake of your family.

Emily Huebscher: Well, thank you so much for talking with me today.

Susan Abramson: My pleasure and good luck with everything.

Emily Huebscher: Is there anything else that you wanted to add?

Susan Abramson: No, I think that's pretty much it.

Emily Huebscher: Ok, Well, thank you.

Susan Abramson: Do you want to be in a congregation.?

TAPE ENDS

**Interviewer:** Emily Huebscher, 5<sup>th</sup> year student HUC

**With:** Rabbi Melanie W. Aron, 1981

**Date:** February 2, 2010

Emily Huebscher: So I just wanted to start with, when you first thought about becoming a rabbi?

Melanie Aron: Ok. I didn't really consider it seriously until after I had finished college and I was in Cincinnati. It's sort of a complicated story. I had been in Israel and had been at the Hebrew University on a Junior year abroad the year after the '73 war and I had switched over from the American Junior year abroad program into the program for Israelis in law in *Mishpatim* and then my parents got concerned that a law degree from Israel only really enables you to work in Israel because they use British common law not American law and they wanted me to come back to Cincinnati and decide if I was really going to live in Israel for the rest of my life. So I had come back to Cincinnati and at that point I was working for the League of Women Voters was it had been really interesting for the first two months but by the third month it was really boring. And really on a fluke, I applied to HUC as a student for the Masters in Jewish History which at that point was a program for Christian fellows as I recall. As a student in the Masters Program of Jewish History I then switched over and applied to the rabbinic program. In retrospect I had been very involved in my congregation; in high school I had been on the board, I was involved in college with the Jewish community on my campus, I had gone to Israel, all these other things in retrospect.... but it was only when I was in the masters program at HUC that I switched over to the rabbinic program.

Emily Huebscher: So my first section is on feminism and femininity. So I want to start with, do you consider yourself a feminist and if so how do you define feminism?

Melanie Aron: I define feminism as the struggle for women's rights and the equality of opportunity.

Emily Huebscher: Has that definition changed throughout your experience in the rabbinate?

Melanie Aron: I'm very aware of sort of the cultural feminism and certainly in my work bringing the women's voice in Judaism has been very important, but I still see feminism primarily as a civil rights issue.

Emily Huebscher: Can you talk a little about bringing that voice in?

Melanie Aron: When I first started it was things like baby naming for girls and encouraging families not to say oh she'll have a sweet 16, what does she need with a *bat mitzvah*. Then it became kind of more scholarship oriented. I wanted to do some documents called *Pirke Emahot*, where I had gone through the Talmud and found all those little sections where *Buriah*, or *Ema Shalom*, or some other female, Rabbi *Gamiel*'s mother had said something and then created a document that paralleled *Pirke Avot* thematically to kind of show the presence of women in the Talmud. I worked with another colleague later on in the rabbinate and a member of my congregation had given me prayer book that he had received as a soldier in WWII in Italy and it turns out it was a woman's prayer book so we translated that. Just finding ways to make women's voice more apparent and even to this day I teach a class every year that's on some issue related to women in Judaism; this year we're doing Jewish women's bodies. We've done women in Yiddish literature, we've done Jewish women playwrights, you know there is a lot more about women and women are taking more

roles particularly in the reform movement. There's not like there isn't a need to encourage the hearing of women's voices.

Emily Huebscher: What role do you think that being a woman played in your rabbinate?

Melanie Aron: In the early years it was the most salient feature that anybody noticed about me. I was ordained in '81 and there were at that point still only a handful of women and so everywhere I went in was like, this rabbi doesn't have a beard kind of thing. And whenever I was invited to talk any place it was talk about women in Judaism or talk about women in the rabbinate. I've been in my present community now for almost 20 years so within the congregation no one notices any more that I'm a woman rabbi, it's sort of what I've been all along but I do still find when I go outside my world of my congregation and the world of reform Judaism, that there are still a lot of old boys or more distressing young boys, younger men in their early 40's who are often libertarians, smoking cigars, who really want to reinstate the old boys' network.

Emily Huebscher: Did you gender affect you liturgical choices in sermons at all?

Melanie Aron: We fought through the addition of the *imohot* and I did that in two different congregations. I went on maternity leave and came back to discover that the woman who had been taking my place, I don't remember was she did about "the Lord" but she did something like dramatic without consulting with anybody and my congregation was freaking out so then we made the transition to "Eternal", so there's been that kind of at the simplest level. Remember, I came in with UPB and then Gates of Prayer and those all had a lot of issues still in them and the High Holiday prayer book for many years also in terms of just adding other kinds of prayers we've done various things with Marsha Bock's work, she's resident in this general community. And I think in sermons or in speaking about things and what I choose to teach it certainly comes through.

Emily Huebscher: How are those received?

Melanie Aron: Changes in liturgy take people a little while; but what was most amazing to me was introducing the *imahot* here was such an uphill battle and then in 2 years no one even remembered doing it the other way. I have found that if you kind of stick to it, it becomes normative really quickly relative to 4000 years of Jewish history.

Emily Huebscher: Did you introduce any women's rituals in your rabbinate?

Melanie Aron: We've had Rosh Chodesh groups at various points, we done other kinds of women's rituals, we've done *shiva*'s when people got divorced, *mikvah* for things other than the traditional use of *mikvah*, we've done some retirement things both for men and for women but women have sought it out more, so I think we've done some life cycle kinds of things that were specific to women's lives. There always were groups of parents of bat mitzvah girls who thought doing something around the onset of menstruation was a great idea and it never met with too much enthusiasm with 12 year old girls.

Emily Huebscher: Were you conscious of making any other decisions in your rabbinate based on your gender?

Melanie Aron: For placement there was definitely an aspect or role that my gender played.

Emily Huebscher: Can you talk about that?

Melanie Aron: So, I think, the first position I got as a Rabbi-educator, I had no background in education, I had taken no classes in education, and I was in a sense fortunate to get that from people's prejudice that of course, I'm a woman so of course, I'd be great in education. When I went out looking for a solo, I think that women at that point were mainly

in congregations that had something drastically wrong with them, my congregation in Brookline had no building; other congregations had no something else because people were still a little uncertain about hiring a woman. I remember with that congregation they had called me at one point in placement they had called me and said thank you very much, lovely to meet you, but you're not right for us. And I went on with my life, and then, as I understand it, Rabbi Stanley Dreyfus had a conversation with them and said, she's as good as you're going to get, what's wrong with you people. But they were very frightened that not having a building and being still in Brookline and being in an area that had gone Orthodox that I would be the nail in the coffin on the congregation. We had five really good years but eventually they did have to merge with another congregation because even if we beat the bushes and found every last reform Jew still in that neighborhood it was just a diminishing population. The area had become quite Orthodox.

Emily Huebscher : What pressures were unique to you as a pioneer?

Melanie Aron: I think it's the sense that everything I was doing was representative of all women. If you dropped the ball in any way it wasn't just a reflection on you, it was a reflection on women in the Rabbinate. I certainly felt that pressure to make sure that everything I did publically was totally well-prepared and good. Because it wasn't just me, it was all my female colleagues into the future who were going to be punished if I was not doing what was well and good. And then, I have a daughter now who is in her 20's and she knows about it now, it drove her crazy, when I had children and went out on maternity leave it was a sense that I had to make that as painless for the congregation as possible to prove they weren't stupid for hiring a woman rabbi. So I paid for my maternity replacements with money from my discretionary fund because it was my fault they didn't have a rabbi for that period of time and I took very short maternity leaves the first two times; so those are things I think that women now come in, now I have staff here and the women demand all kinds of things and the men demand all kinds of paternity leave – I mean more than I had even for maternity leave. More power to them but... There was a pressure not to make those aspects of your being a woman that visible to the congregation, and I would never say I can't do this because I have to pick up my kids or I can't do this because my kids need me. I might still have to do that, but I certainly would never say that because I didn't want them thinking, oh we hired a woman and that's why she's got sick kids. I was fortunate that my husband was an academic and his schedule had a lot of flexibility and if I made a commitment, I showed up.

Emily Huebscher : How do you think that the pressures have changed?

Melanie Aron: On some levels, I think the pressures are really different. There's women faculty, there's women's bathrooms, there's all kinds of stuff. At the college and when you go out to congregations there are other women who have been rabbi in your community if not at your congregation. So I think that the uniqueness of you so that people can see you more as you, yeah, there's this woman rabbi who does that and there's that woman rabbi who does this and it's not about her being a woman rabbi, it's rabbis are different, this one sings and that one doesn't sing, this one has curly hair; so I think that in some senses it's really, really different on the other hand I wouldn't say that society isn't so totally changed or so totally egalitarian that there aren't still issues-- how people listen to a woman in a community situation, like the Board of Federation, or whatever it's still different.

Emily Huebscher: How's that?

Melanie Aron: There are still elements in the general Jewish community who aren't used to women being in certain kinds of leadership positions, so in this world I'm used to if I say something people hear what I'm saying but that's not true for women in other settings. It's kind of shocking to me when I realize I'm back in that old world still.

Emily Huebscher : Were you conscious of how the rabbinate was changing at the time of the emergence of women rabbis?

Melanie Aron: I think the rabbinate has changed a lot in the years since my ordination. I don't know if at the time I was ordained I saw the rabbinate in flux but over the years I've seen a lot of changes. The hierarchical nature to the CCAR for example, that really existed when I used to go to those first CCAR conventions, that's really different now. There's a lot that's been gained about that and there's something that was lost too.

Emily Huebscher : How would you describe it now?

Melanie Aron: There was sort of a seniority system when I was first ordained and I think there isn't that same kind of seniority system, and I don't think there's that same sense of *gidule hador*. Or maybe it's because of *gidule hador* nowadays that my classmates and I can't quite see them in that role I'm not quite sure what it is. But I certainly felt when I was that young rabbi going to the CCAR this awesomeness of some of the older teachers and when they gave the presidents sermon at the CCAR that was a very special and awesome moment. That's changed for me and I think that part of it is just a certain informality that has come into things over the years, and it may also just reflect that I'm these people's colleague. I remember them when they were little pischers. It's different than meeting people that you've read their stuff in books.

Emily Huebscher : Do you think that women had a role in the changing of the rabbinate?

Melanie Aron: Yes, I think that some of the, what do I call it, personalization, emphasis on the people-ness I think that Rabbi Yoffe's recent sermon about food is really different than the sermons that Alex Schendler gave in his years. I think that Judaism in all parts of our life, our daily life, I think that that is a reflection of women in the rabbinate as well.

Emily Huebscher: So my next section is on the sort of more superficial image of the rabbi, so sort of that aspect that is the physical aspect of the rabbinate. So I want to start with, I read an article by Joy Levitt who described two models for women in the rabbinate, the navy-blue suit model which is the rabbi who saw herself as very similar to a male and then the goddess rabbi who saw herself as the opposite of a male, if that's a continuum, could you place yourself on it?

Melanie Aron: So I'm definitely more on the side of the navy blue suit. I think I may do some things differently from that authority model partly because I'm a woman and partly because I was raised in a *chavorah* and I'd never been part of a kind of standard synagogue kind of place. At least in my formative high school years when I served on the board of my congregation, my congregation was rabbi-less and building-less, and cantor-less and authority-less and was more of a *chavorah* kind of thing. But I'm definitely not... I would not view myself on the side of the earth-mother-goddess kind of model of the rabbinate.

Emily Huebscher: What challenges did you face in creating your more superficial image in your rabbinate?

Melanie Aron: Earliest memories of women in the rabbinate is of Sally Priesand because I grew up in Cincinnati and Sally was the student rabbi at Isaac and Wise, one of the

big reform Temples in town at the time, and that was in the neighborhood where I grew up. I would hear people talking; it was in the late 1960's, early 1970's: oh her skirt is so short, isn't that terrible, or then when she wore a long skirt, I was like oh my God, how dowdy can you be, why did they pick such a dowdy woman to be the first woman rabbi. So I sort of came into this with the experience of that sort of sniping at whatever she did. So my goal in the early years of dressing was to be un-rememberable in terms of my dress, I didn't want anyone remembering, oh my God, the rabbi was wearing this and that was my general principle. I had some exceptions, I remember once in San Antonio, TX, where I was a student rabbi, it was like a million degrees and I had a funeral and I put on my dressy shoes but no hose because it was unbelievably hot and somebody called the senior rabbi to let him know that I had done the funeral without hose. That was kind of the level of people's interest in what women wore. And then years later, here, I had somebody send me an anonymous letter that was sort of to the effect that you're so smart but why don't you dress better. Kind of a weird thing. How much did that reflect clothes or how much did that reflect a sort of power struggle that was going on within the congregation at that time. And I know who I think wrote that letter but I don't know that I'll ever know for sure. But certainly I think that there's more focus on women's clothes. A man puts on a suit and it's indistinguishable, I think for women there are just more issue.

Emily Huebscher : Did you model yourself more after professional women at your time or more after rabbinical men?

Melanie Aron: Professional women, but remember professional women in those days were wearing suits, so professional women, lawyers and business women were trying to look professional which meant trying to look like men who had been professionals in the past generations. And I would have to say that the idea of not dressing in a way that people remembered your clothes rather than remembering what you had to say or what you were doing.

Emily Huebscher : Do you have any other stories about people commenting on the way that you looked?

Melanie Aron: There's a web site that Unitarian women have. Somebody from Alban who I work with on various things sent it to me recently. We have a clergy woman's group that meets for lunch from time to time and we had a great time looking at the web site together, talking about the different things, because it is something that binds women clergy; everyone had a story about something with their clothes. Also, being in California eventually made it easier; this is not such a formal community

Emily Huebscher : How do you think the picture of the women rabbi has changed over the course of your rabbinate?

Melanie Aron: I think just because of the number of women now that there isn't so much the picture of the woman rabbi. People know women rabbis who are more liberal and women rabbis who are more conservative, women rabbis who are kind of hippy dippy and women rabbis who are half bankers There's just a lot more room for different models because people don't see that it's of necessity that because you're a woman you're also x, y, and z.

Emily Huebscher : So what assumptions did people make about you as a woman rabbi?

Melanie Aron: I think in the early years there was concern or assumptions that women rabbis were mostly concerned with women's issues. And we were, but it was also constraining.

Emily Huebscher : As a pioneer woman rabbi did you feel like you were part of the group that shaped the image of the future female rabbi?

Melanie Aron: I always felt that I was the second group. There were women who were ordained more or less alone and then in the class right before me there was a little clump of women and in my class there was a clump of women so I think the experience of being those women who were 1 or 2 in their class was different than those of us who went to school with a group of women. So I view the real pioneers are the pre-1980 women and I view 1980 as a real time of transition, in terms of those who were ordained in 1980. So when I got to the college in 1976-77, there were other women there in some number.

Emily Huebscher : Other than Sally, had you met any of the women who had become rabbis before you?

Melanie Aron: Before I enrolled at HUC? I don't think so. At some point, I was aware of a woman in Indianapolis who was Reconstructionist. But I don't think I had met any other women rabbis until I was at HUC. And then I started going to the WRN so I met the women in New York and women from the Recon. I was raised Conservative and I had gone to visit JTS and discovered that they still had a *machitza* for student worship and so I just wrote it off as this was never going to happen. I had thought about the Reconstructionist but at that point they were having some really serious institutional issues and I was just afraid to go to a school that was going to close before I finished graduating. Also, I had been raised in Cincinnati so I knew a lot of the faculty as the fathers of my friends growing up and they were much more impressive than the congregational rabbis that I knew in the Conservative Movement. So HUC had a positive valence to me.

Emily Huebscher : So, my last section is on the professional realities of the woman rabbis. So I want to start with what you felt was your greatest success as a rabbi?

Melanie Aron: What I enjoy in the rabbinate is taking an idea and bringing it into fruition. Some of those ideas were little things that we did in you know in smaller settings in which I worked early on and some of them are here. Bringing this congregation from a sort of makeshift, start-up into a congregation that is a significant player in the community.

Emily Huebscher: What are the ways in which you think being a woman facilitate your success?

Melanie Aron: I think there were people who were very turned off to Judaism who would give me a chance because I was a woman rabbi so I wasn't like the Judaism they were turned off to so I think that in California in particular that's been very helpful. People did see me maybe a little bit differently than a male rabbi and that sometimes allowed for an openness.

Emily Huebscher: What do you feel the greatest challenges to you as a female rabbi?

Melanie Aron: I think it was getting the foot in the door. It was getting congregations to interview and to get congregations to consider me as a candidate. In other settings just getting people to just get passed that first "who is she? what is she doing here?" I'm not someone who takes over a room when I enter it, whether that's a female characteristic or just who I am. Sometimes it's getting people to hang in long enough to then see that my leadership is still there, it's just there in a different way than taking over everything in the first instant.

Emily Huebscher: Would you consider your overall experience in the rabbinate more positive or negative?

Melanie Aron: More positive, that doesn't mean there aren't days I would say more negative, but on the whole, more positive.

Emily Huebscher: What do you think it is about you made you able to succeed as a pioneer or how I define pioneer rabbi.

Melanie Aron: A couple of things helped me, one is that I'm someone who takes direction to a large extent from myself. It's not that I never care what other people think but I'd have to say that it has to be right by me more than I care whether it's right by other people. Certain kinds of criticism or chirping just doesn't register that much with me. It's good in it's own way, but it's something that has to be balanced with. I'm also fortunate that my mother no matter what somebody did that would feel mean or wrong-spirited she always would have you... oh, but you know their brother is sick... and I think that that's helped me a lot in the rabbinate to kind of see people in their own context and not take everything as being so much about me, and to be somewhat forgiving of people. My dad was a doctor and I spent a lot of time with him in childhood, just in the hospital, he would make rounds and I would hang out with the dictating machine

Emily Huebscher: Do you have any advice for future rabbis.

Melanie Aron: When I left Brookline after five years, I thought oh I ought to jot down one or two things for the person who succeeds me and I ended up writing like this whole book which was probably was more information than they needed and not that useful so in particulars I have a lot of things that I think are worth learning. In general, I say a thick skin doesn't hurt in the rabbinate, I think you should like services and things if you're going to go into the congregational rabbinate because in the rabbinate that's going to be a big part of your job. I'm always surprised when people really at a gut level really don't. When they're not on the *bima* they have no desire to be at services and I think that's unfortunate to have to spend so much of your time focused on something that you're not really that inclined towards, I think the rabbinate is still special because it's a lot of different things in an age of real specialization and you're not so part of a corporate structure, you make your rabbinate, you have to work with your board and this and that but on some level you make your priorities. And I've really enjoyed that aspect of it.

Emily Huebscher: Thanks so much for talking with me.

Melanie Aron: You're very welcome. And I hope when you get this together you'll share some of your findings with us.

Emily Huebscher: Absolutely. Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

Melanie Aron: Not off hand, no.

Emily Huebscher: Ok, good, well, thanks so much.

**Interviewer:** Emily Huebscher, 5<sup>th</sup> year student HUC

**With:** Rabbi Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus, 1979

**Date:** February 16, 2010

Emily Huebscher: When did you first think about becoming a rabbi?

Ellen Dreyfus: I think I first thought about it in the early 70's when I was in college but I rejected the idea at that point. I knew about Sally Priesand, I knew that she existed and I knew that she was a student at the time. I finished high school in 1969 and was very active in NFTY and knew that there was this woman who was a student at HUC. It intrigued me a little at that point but I rejected the idea at that point because I didn't want to do something for the thrill value of being a "woman rabbi." And so I knew I wanted to study more and it wasn't until my senior year in college when I was facing one of those what do you want to be when you grow up kind of decisions when I started considering it more seriously.

Emily Huebscher: Do you remember making the ultimate decision?

Ellen Dreyfus: Yeah. So how did I make this decision? First of all, when I decided that I wanted to go to HUC, at first it was a decision about wanting to go to study. I finished college in 1973, it was a very different picture than you see today. There were not Jewish studies programs on almost every campus. In those days if you wanted to study Jewish Studies on a graduate level it was sort of like the choices were you could go to Brandeis and get a PhD in Jewish studies or you could go to rabbinic school. Not quite that narrow but it sort of seemed that way to me. And I wanted to study. At some point we can talk about what motivated me but some of my experiences in college made me realize a) how much I didn't know and b) how much I loved studying this stuff and needed to learn a tremendous amount more and that's what motivated me to do graduate work.

But I realized that I was not cut out to be a professor. If I were in an academic situation, if it was publish or perish, I would surely perish. I wanted to relate to people in ways other than teacher and student all of the time. I wanted to teach but I wanted to do other things other than only teach and I knew that I was not an academician. The rabbinate appealed to me ultimately, first it appealed to me for the opportunity to study for five years. That just seemed like an amazing opportunity. But I looked at in terms of the variety and the flexibility of the rabbinate. And I saw it kind of on a vertical and horizontal plane if you will. On the horizontal plane I saw the variety of the rabbinate in that a rabbi is a teacher and a preacher and a community leader and a counselor and on and on and on which appealed to me because I get bored easily and I didn't just want to be doing one thing all the time. The vertical plane, if you will, I don't know why I thought about it in that way but that is how I was thinking about it in those years, was over the course of a career and over the course of a lifetime, there was a lot of flexibility in the rabbinate. And that one could really change careers without having to go back for re-training. That one could be in a congregation or a hospital chaplain or do community work or do any number of things with the title rabbi and that offered a great deal of flexibility. And that particularly appealed to me as someone who wanted to combine a career and a family. So that was my thought process in deciding that this was the right way for me to go.

Emily Huebscher: How do you define feminism? Do you consider yourself as a feminist?

Ellen Dreyfus: I absolutely consider myself a feminist. I think someone once defined feminism as the, let me see if I get this right, the belief that women are fully human, or something like that. Yes, of course, the notion that women had equal potential and capability in most aspects of life. And that anatomy was not necessarily destiny in terms of everything. I mean, childbirth, ok, I'll grant you that. In terms of a career or doing what one wanted to do, one shouldn't be limited because of being a woman. So I've always considered myself a feminist, ever since I knew the term.

Emily Huebscher: Has that definition changed through your experience in the rabbinate?

Ellen Dreyfus: Not really. I mean, I've always believed that women are capable of doing... I mean other than purely biological stuff, I'll sort of leave that out... but that women have the same kinds of potential as men. There shouldn't be a barrier because of gender. That being said, I also don't think that women and men are the same and I actually wrote something about this that was in the WRN newsletter a few years ago. Did you ever see that?

Emily Huebscher: I haven't come across that, do you know which article it is in?

Ellen Dreyfus: Which Newsletter? Um, no I'm not sure but I can find it for you. Send me an e-mail to remind me to look for it but they asked some of the *vatikot* to write some things.

Emily Huebscher: Do you guys refer to yourselves as the *vatikot*?

Ellen Dreyfus: Yes, yes. And I wrote about an incident that happened, when I was about to leave for my year in Israel, so this was in September of 1974, my brother got married that weekend so I didn't arrive in Israel with my class. I arrived there the next day because my brother's wedding was on the day that everybody else traveled.

The *auf ruf* for my brother and sister-in-law was at Emmanuel Congregation in Chicago, where Rabbi Herman Shalman was the rabbi. Rabbi Shalman spoke that Shabbat, I don't think he had any idea that I was...that I was intending to leave for HUC that following evening, but he spoke about the fact that there was a large number of women in the entering class at HUC, that this was the biggest group so far, and that he hoped that these women would do something different in the rabbinate, that they wouldn't just be like the men, that they would contribute something unique to the rabbinate. And I remember being upset with that at the time because I was all into equality and I think I was wrongly assuming that equality meant same, that equal meant same. And I thought that, well, we can do anything men can do and we're not going to be different and all that kind of stuff.

Many years later, I reminded Rabbi Shalman of this when he was president of the CCAR and he appointed me to sit on the task force for women in the rabbinate, when I was a young rabbi. And I thanked him and I told him he was absolutely right at the time and that it took me a long time to realize it. And I didn't put it this way to him but I'm not interested in being a rabbi in drag. I'm not interested in trying to be a man. And that the way I am as a rabbi is unique but it also has to do with me as a woman as well as a Jew, as a rabbi, etc. etc. We don't have to be the same to be equal.

Emily Huebscher: What role did being a woman play in your rabbinate?

Ellen Dreyfus: Well, it's played a tremendous role. For one thing, I did the mommy track before it had a name. I was pregnant with my first child at ordination and as far as we know I was the first rabbi in Jewish history to be ordained pregnant. I chose not to take a full time position, which was very unpopular. It was unpopular among women who feared I would brand all of us as unreliable. And that the assumption would be that women won't want to work full time when they have babies and that somehow I will put a black mark on women as reliable employees. And, at the same time, there were older male

colleagues who were very condescending and patronizing in saying, “Well, of course you’ll stay home with your baby, dear.” As if that hadn’t been a very difficult decision on my part. Nobody knew what to do with it. Nobody knew what part-time meant in those days. And so it was a very lonely decision, and I think it was misunderstood by many, and I did it anyway. I very much wanted to nurse my babies; that was extremely important to me and I didn’t want someone else to raise my kids. And so the idea of having a nanny who would be there full time and that I would sort of drop in for what they called in those days quality-time, didn’t appeal to me. I’m also married to someone with a career, my husband is a physician, and I knew that if both of us were going to swing careers we had to choose a path that would allow us to spend time with each other (because one of the reasons that we got married is that we actually like to spend time with each other) and to spend time with our kids. And so, I really see neither of us as terribly ambitious, that was kind of the way we went into this. We figured, well, we’ll do our thing in our little neighborhood and it will be ok. But making that choice was certainly very much influenced by the fact that I’m a woman and that I was birthing babies. So really for the first eleven years of my rabbinate I worked part time. I had three kids and made choices about my own career based on being part of a couple and being a mom.

Emily Huebscher: How did your gender affect your liturgical choices and sermons?

Ellen Dreyfus: Yeah, not sermons so much, I mean occasionally I’ll speak on something that someone would consider a women’s issue but I think there are men who speak on the same kinds of things. Long before we had inclusive liturgy I was changing the words in the liturgy. I don’t refer to God as “he”. I find that’s just way too limiting. And so I was changing the words early on.

I remember being at a service soon after probably the publication of Gates of Prayer, but it was some sort of special service at another congregation where they were using... they were using the old Union Prayer Book and there was a line in there that said something like, “God is the Father of all men.” And I thought, “Whoa! Where am I in that?” I couldn’t deal with that language; so language is important to me and precision of language is important to me, and so I did language changing. I started including the *imahot* in the liturgy before it was printed in the books of the movement.

Even to the extent of there used to be, I guess its still in existence, there was a prayer book called Gates of the House. And it was the home prayer book, I think the subtitle is the New Union Home Prayer Book. I think its called Gates of the House. Now actually at the time just before it was published, Chaim Stern, who was the editor, and I were having a conversation. He said that it was going to be called *Sha’arei Beitecha*, the Gates of your House. Well, at the time I was living with two other women, I said. “If you call it that I can’t use it in my house.” It’s masculine singular. And he said. “Oh my God, you’re right.” And so he changed the name to *Shaarei Habayit*, and had to go find a different proof text and all of that. But, you know, it made a difference to me. I didn’t want something that excluded me even from the title.

Now of course when they changed and revised the book it ended up being called On the Doorposts of Your House and it was *Al Mezuzot Beitecha*, but that was a direct biblical quote. So I guess they didn’t change it, I guess one can accept it more as a metaphor if it’s a direct quote.

I think if you asked my congregants over the years they would say that being a woman is very much of who I am as a rabbi. There have been many times over the years where women

have come to me for counseling and said things like, “I could never talk about this to a man.” Or even sometimes men have said to me, “It was easier to talk to you about this than so and so who was your predecessor (who was a male).” I don’t know if that’s just me and if an empathic listening male would also have the same kind of response but it certainly is very much part of who I am as a rabbi.

You know, it’s hard to ... when you ask a question like “has it affected or how has it played into my being a rabbi” it reminds me of way back when I was just in rabbinic school. People would say to my mother “She’s going to be a woman rabbi.” And my mom would say. “I don’t know what other kind she could be.” I don’t know how to be a rabbi who isn’t a woman. It’s impossible. So I can’t divorce being a rabbi from being a woman because I’ve never tried it any other way. Does that make sense?

Emily Huebscher: Mhm. Did you introduce any women’s rituals in your rabbinate?

Ellen Dreyfus: You’re leaving that open ended so that I can interpret what that means?

Emily Huebscher: Yes.

Ellen Dreyfus: Ok.

Emily Huebscher: I’m trying not to be too leading.

Ellen Dreyfus: I understand. I have, for example, I had special services for Rosh Chodesh and have introduced, over the years... I’ve been with this congregation now, this is my twenty-third year with at least part of the congregation so its been a long time. But I introduced them to Rosh Chodesh, they didn’t really know about it, and now, on a regular basis, our sisterhood has their sisterhood Shabbat on a Shabbat that is also Rosh Chodesh and they do a service based on a service that is a Shabbat/ Rosh Chodesh service. I’ve had *adult bar and bat mitzvah* classes over the years but one year it happened that no men enrolled and it was all women and it really became, among other things, a support group. It was a remarkable group of women and at the service when they all read from the Torah and gave their little *divrei torah* and that kind of stuff, at the very end, at the point when I would ordinarily bless the *bar or bat mitzvah* kid, I said to this group, “You are all such a blessing, I would like you to bless each other. This was kind of a ritual that I had learned at the WRN and so they all sort of sat in a circle and blessed each other. And then, what was fascinating was they said, “Now we’d like to bless you,” which was very touching and very sweet. Now I don’t know if that’s a women’s ritual, I suppose that could be done by anybody but I learned it at a WRN conference 20 something years ago. I could probably figure it out because my son David was a baby and he’s 23 now. Whatever. I’m trying to think of other women’s rituals, *per se*.

Emily Huebscher: Or other choices in your rabbinate based on your gender...

Ellen Dreyfus: Well, for example, I’m very interested in food. Now, I know there are a lot of men who are also interested in food too, but food in Judaism and *kashrut* and the idea of *kedusha* in food and how we eat and what we eat and that sort of thing have always something that has interested me. So I cook and they know that and that’s part of who I am as a rabbi so that if the kids are doing a dessert auction, my cake goes for lots and lots of money. They ask me to come to their Passover “taste and tell” program to speak about food and Passover but also they want me to bring something because they know I cook well. Now I don’t know if that’s necessarily female because, in fact, in my brother’s congregation (my brother’s also a rabbi) he’s known as the latke king. And everybody wants his latkes so he’s also a rabbi who cooks. So I don’t think it’s necessarily a female trait, it’s just something that

is traditionally associated with women certainly and it's something that I love to do. I joke sometimes that I love to cook because it's one of the things that I do where I can actually see the results of my work.

Emily Huebscher: I like that. So, what pressures were unique to you as a pioneer?

Ellen Dreyfus: Well, I already mentioned that the idea of not following the typical path to success was very difficult. The assumption in those days, 30 years ago or so, was if you wanted to be successful in the rabbinate you would go into an assistantship immediately upon ordination. You'd learn how to do that and then you'd go off to a solo congregation and work your way up until you could be the senior rabbi at a mega temple, and that was the definition of success. I was not interested in any of that. First of all, I chose to work part time, which was completely, should we say, counter-cultural. But I also have been in a small congregation for many, many years and didn't feel the need to be in a large congregation. And there's something very rewarding and really very lovely for those of us who have the temperament for it, to be in a small congregation and never felt somehow that that was not as successful as being in a large congregation. So I just completely reject size as a measure of success. And I think to some extent that is part of... that changing the definition of success is something that I think women have contributed to the rabbinate. I think we simply weren't interested in the corporate categories of success.

For many years I have said that I'm content to grow where I'm planted. I'm in this community, my husband and I chose this community because, first of all I'm from Chicago, but I'm not in the city, I'm in the south suburbs and really most of the Jews are in the north suburbs. So I'm in a small community but his practice is in northwest Indiana. So I'm kind of geographically bound unless I want to commute an hour or more, and I'm not interested in doing that. But I just sort of figured, "Ok, I'll stay in this community, I'll teach what I can, I'll influence the people I can, I'll have small ripples and *daienu*, that will be enough."

Never in my life did I suspect that I would end up as the president of the CCAR.

So I really do believe that my becoming president of the conference says less about me and more about the redefinition of success in the rabbinate. When I was first in the conference, the president was Rabbi Jerome Melino and everybody said he was from a small congregation. Well I look back now and his congregation was maybe 400 households. Mine is under 200. And I think he even had an assistant! So his wasn't small but it was smaller than the typical and since then all of the presidents of the conference have either been rabbis of very large congregations with assistants or retired, with the exception of Richard Levy who worked for Hillel. But he was an exception, he was one of the few non-congregational rabbis to become president. Now I don't remember the original question?

Emily Huebscher: That's ok. What other changes do you think women contributed to the rabbinate?

Ellen Dreyfus: I think that the consciousness that the rabbi has a life outside the congregation and a family became much more acute for lay people, for the congregants, when the rabbi was the mom more so than when the rabbi was the dad and, to some extent, I think that that has been liberating for our male colleagues as well. There was no such thing as family leave. There was no such thing as... rabbis weren't expected to take time off when their child was born because it was the rabbi's wife who had the baby (for crying out loud). The idea that a rabbi would take time away from work and spend time with his kids, it didn't happen so much. I know that sounds completely outrageous to say in this day and age but if you go back a generation, it wasn't so outrageous. My father-in-law was a rabbi. He was in

congregations for years and years and years. He spent time at home with his children but he didn't go to their track meets and he didn't go to their swim meets and he didn't go to their school plays and he didn't go to any of that stuff because he was always working. That was something that their mother did. Now, I don't think he was the only workaholic in the rabbinate. In fact, when I first talked to my rabbi... when I went to college I went to see Rabbi Jacob Weinstein who was also a CCAR president. He was a rabbi at KAM Temple where I grew up in Chicago and I told him I was thinking about the possibility of going to rabbinic school and becoming a rabbi. And he said that he didn't want to encourage me to do that, and in fact he would certainly support me if I chose to but he kind of wanted to discourage me. He said, and this was an amazing admission on his part, he said I don't think that I've been a very good father and I can't imagine how one could be a rabbi and be a good mother.

Now I don't know if you've spoken with Sally Priesand but she made a decision early on not to marry and not to have children because she didn't think she could do both. I wasn't going to make that choice. I also knew other women who made the choice, for example, to take full time positions when they had little bitty kids... I knew one rabbi, for example, who decided not to breast feed because she and her husband both wanted to have equal nurturing and feeding of the child. And I thought what a shame. It's a great decision for her but I never would have made that decision. That was not something I wanted to give up. But I think that the fact that it was just a difference consciousness if you had a rabbi who was a mommy and that really opened things up for rabbis who were daddies.

Emily Huebscher: I read an article by Joy Levitt (RRC 81), describing two models for women in the rabbinate: Navy Blue Suit, a rabbi who saw herself as the same as a male, and the Goddess, a rabbi who saw herself as the absolute opposite of a male. If that is a continuum, can you place yourself on it?

Ellen Dreyfus: [laughs] I think I've been everywhere on the continuum, it just depends on the day!

I didn't want to be a rabbi in drag. I wasn't interested in looking like a man, walking like a man, talking like a man... and so I'd have to figure out how to do this rabbi stuff and do it as a woman. The blue suit thing it makes me chuckle because when I was in rabbinical school the fashion choices available to us were so much more limited than they are now.

In those days, it was before... you're young, I don't know if you remember this but there was a dress for success movement for a while for women and they were showing suits and all of that but it was all ... that's what they called it, dress for success... but this was before that and it was very hard to find appropriate clothing. We couldn't afford to go to Brooks Brothers, which was one of the only places that had suits for women, so did you want to look like a secretary or like a slut. It was hard to find kind of in between or appropriate or professional. It really was terribly difficult in those days and we had to try to figure it all out. I did have a navy blue suit for my interviews, and all of that until I grew out of it in my pregnancy. And I still have a navy blue suit and I have a black suit, I have suits that I wear when the occasion calls for it. I have skirt suits and pants suits. There was a long, long, long time when I never wore pants on the *bima*, until probably the last 10-12 years, when I guess pants became more accepted. But I would never wear pants on the *bima* with the exception of one time when I had a brace on my ankle and I couldn't get into stockings or shoes that would be appropriate with a skirt. I guess I want, when I'm being rabbinic, when I'm in an official kind of a situation whether that's on the pulpit or at some kind of life cycle event or

at a community event where I am the rabbi representing the Jewish community or at an official meeting or something, I want to look serious and I want to be taken seriously. Were I to wear something frilly or something frivolous or something that could be seen as somehow sloppy or too casual then I wouldn't be taken seriously. That's not to say that I wouldn't wear a party dress if I were going to a party. I remember when my brother and I were doing our cousin's wedding many years ago. I told him that we were going to wear robes for the ceremony and he said, "Why? I never wear a robe at a wedding." And I said, "I want to wear a party dress and it would look silly under the *chuppah* so I'm going to wear the robe as camouflage while I'm being a rabbi and then take that off and be dressed for the party afterwards."

Emily Huebscher: What did he say?

Ellen Dreyfus: He agreed to it. He said, "Ok, all right, no problem." It's much easier for the guys, they just put on a suit and they are dressed. They don't have as many decisions to make. What color tie, oh boy that's a big decision. It's much more nuanced and complicated for women.

Emily Huebscher: What other kinds of decisions have you found that you had to make about your appearance?

Ellen Dreyfus: My appearance... I wear a modicum of makeup on a regular basis. When I go over to the gym to work out I don't wear makeup but if I come to the temple or if I'm at any kind of a public meeting I'm going to put on something so that I don't look like something the cat dragged in. I remember one time I was dressed for Purim and I think I was Vashti and had this bright blue eye-shadow on, it was just absolutely horrendous, awful, and one of the congregants came over and said, "Oh rabbi you look so lovely, I never saw you with makeup before." Which just made me laugh because she had never seen me without makeup, I just didn't look like a clown.

Decisions... about appearance... Well, there's the whole *talit* and *kipah* thing. Do you want to put that in here?

Emily Huebscher: Sure.

Ellen Dreyfus: I've been wearing a *talit* for a very, very long time. I guess I bought my first *talit* my year in Israel. You have to understand that, when I became *bat mitzvah* the boys didn't wear *talitot* in reform congregations, nobody did. The rabbi had an *atara* on his robe but nobody wore a *talit*, or a *kipah* for that matter, in the congregation where I grew up. To buy a *talit* was a pretty radical thing to do in 1974, but I wore a *talit* on a regular basis.

It wasn't until, let me think what year that was, 1984. I was working in a congregation, I started to work in a congregation in Kankakee, IL, a part time pulpit. It was an unaffiliated so called conservative congregation. The first service that I conducted I put on my *talit* and did the service and afterwards the president came up to me and said, "Someone came over to me and said Rabbi Dreyfus must be really nervous because she forgot her yarmulke." And I said, "Well no, I didn't forget it," and I went into this whole long explanation about that Jewish women usually cover their hair out of modesty and that I had tried something different and on and on about men and women and head coverings and he said, "Well you know here all the men wear them." [Laughs] And I said, "Oh by the way, in case you hadn't noticed..." Well, it turns out, when I finally got through all of this confusion, it turns out that in that congregation the *kipah* was not seen as male garb but as pulpit garb and that everyone who went up on the pulpit, including the women who went up to do the candle blessings, would

put on some kind of a head covering. It was very important to that congregation that their rabbi have on a *kipah* or something like it. So I said fine, as long as it is clear that.... In that day and age it still wasn't clear what we were supposed to do. We were still kind of creating the pattern. And so I agreed. I said, "That's fine." And so I started to wear a *kipah* and then I decided, well, again, I don't want to be in drag, I don't want to just wear a male style *kipah*. So I started finding the Bucharian style ones and I started finding the more pretty crocheted things but more feminine looking. And so I wear one ever since for prayer and for study and things like that but it's not typically the same one that my male colleague would wear. And as far as *talitot*, I have a collection. I have, I don't know, half a dozen or more. I always want my *talit* to somehow go with what I am wearing, so I have a variety in different colors and sizes. I think about that, sort of fashions for the rabbinate.

Emily Huebscher: Do you have any stories about people commenting the way you looked?

Ellen Dreyfus: Well for a long time I wore a robe on the pulpit and I really wore it more as camouflage than anything else. I wore it because I didn't want people to comment on what I was wearing. I didn't want, "Oh Mildred, didn't she wear that last week?" I didn't want people to be talking about my wardrobe, and so the robe provided that kind of camouflage. At some point, I don't remember how many years ago, I came home from camp and the idea of putting on a robe after being at camp for a couple of weeks teaching, it just seemed so foreign and so distancing. I didn't do it. Almost nobody noticed, and it was fine. I don't remember anyone missing it. I still wear a robe for the High Holidays. But that is sort of the seriousness of the occasion. It's white, of course, for the Holy Days. I'm not a *kittel* type so a white robe will do it for me.

Other comments about appearance... I may think of something later on.

Emily Huebscher: Has the picture of the woman rabbi changed over the course of your rabbinate?

Ellen Dreyfus: We've become ordinary. There are so many now and it's not shocking to people anymore. 30 years ago when I would say I'm a rabbi, people would do a double take.

I worked for a year soon after ordination - I worked as a hospital chaplain in New York. Kind of between children I worked, my first two kids are 18 months apart so between kids I worked as a hospital chaplain. I would get these puzzled looks when I told people, you know, introduced myself as rabbi. I learned that I kind of had to deal with these things with a sense of humor. People would say things like, "Oh, you're a rabbi and you don't even have a beard." They thought that was so clever and so funny. I would respond with, "No, and I'm not circumcised either." That was that.

Now I don't think anybody would bat an eyelash if a woman came into a hospital room and introduced herself as the rabbi. In subsequent years I've had a lot of people saying, "Oh wow that's so cool," or "Gee, that's wonderful," or that kind of response but not, "You're a WHAT? How can that possibly be?" The kind of responses we got early on.

We've become commonplace, which is delightful.

Emily Huebscher: What assumptions were made about you as a female rabbi?

Ellen Dreyfus: I don't know... assumptions made about me. Let me think about this. To some extent I think people expected me to be more empathetic if you will than their picture of a male rabbi. The typical female traits, stereotypical I mean... I think they assumed that I would know nothing about finance. That I would not have to, it's like, "Don't worry your pretty little head about the business side of things," and would be surprised when I

would ask questions that belied that. I don't know what else... what other people assumed about me.

Emily Huebscher: As a pioneer woman rabbi to you feel like you were part of the group that shaped the image of the future female rabbi?

Ellen Dreyfus: I definitely do, I definitely do. We were such a disparate group in so many ways. I think we each contributed to the big picture. How to do this thing that... we tried to do... we didn't have any road map. Our role models were men who were rabbis and women who had careers in other fields and we had to patch that together to create who we were and what we wanted to be. And each of us did it in our own way. So I really do feel that I am part of that legacy for you and your generation.

The fact that I did the part time thing and what people would now call the mommy-track, that was one option. But I didn't just say I'm going to give up who I want to be as a person, and particularly a person in relation to my husband and to my children and my family, I didn't give that up because of somebody else's idea of what a rabbi should be. That just opens up other possibilities. I said early on that I turned in my cape, I'm not super woman; I can't do it all. I don't think that by saying that I'm saying that I want to do less or that I'm settling second-class citizenship or something like that, but I simply can't do everything at the same time, and I wasn't about to give up the kinds of things I wanted to do as a mom. I think it's very interesting that my eldest son, the one I was pregnant with at ordination, got married last August to a rabbi. I guess I haven't completely warped my children and that he didn't grow up thinking that a rabbi was a terrible thing for his mom to be.

Emily Huebscher: What do you feel was your greatest success as a rabbi?

Ellen Dreyfus: One of my greatest successes has to do with really promoting cooperation in my community. As I said the Jews are in the north suburbs and I'm in the south suburbs. When I came here there were four congregations in the south suburbs. One of the things that I was able to do was help engineer a merger between two of them. Even before that, I helped start what is still called the Cooperative Jewish Council. This is an organization of the synagogues, the JCC, the Federation, Hadassah, National Council of Jewish Women, B'nai Brith, Jewish War Veterans, you name it, any Jewish organization is part of the Cooperative Jewish Council. The idea was, particularly in a small community, we would all win by cooperating and that everybody could benefit from that rather than just having everyone compete for the time and money and energy and loyalty and all that of the Jews in our community. The CJC has been able to have scholars in residence, we've been able to share resources in a number of different ways. My synagogue shares a school with the conservative synagogue. Cooperation really has been, I believe, a hallmark of my rabbinate and I've tried very, very hard to encourage other people to cooperate rather than compete. That's not to say that we don't compete with the other congregations, there is a limited number of Jews to be members and we want them and they want them, but we don't have knock down drag out fights about it. We cooperate in as many ways as we possibly can. I really do believe that that's something that I have had a lot to do with in this community. So I see that as a big success.

What else, I've sent a lot of kids to Israel. I'm in a tiny congregation so a lot is not many but over the past... oh... 9 years, I think I've had 8 kids go to EIE which is huge when you think about it, it's almost one a year. Something like that, the past 9 or 10 years, something like that. That's a huge percentage. When you think that my confirmation classes are anywhere

from 2-8 kids, if I have one of those kids going to EIE every year, that's just pretty amazing. I'm very proud of that. I encouraged kids and adults to go to Israel as much as possible. Successes in the rabbinate... I guess my involvement in the CCAR has to be seen as a success. Also in the greater Jewish community. I was the first woman to be president of the Chicago Board of Tabbis and that was a big deal, front page of the Sun Times and all of that kind of stuff. I like rabbis (believe it or not) and evidently my colleagues respect me and see me as a leader and so they have elected me to various offices. I am very honored by that. I can't think of a greater honor than to be chosen by one's colleagues to be the leader so that has to be seen as a major success in my rabbinate.

Emily Huebscher: What are the ways in which being a woman facilitated your success?

Ellen Dreyfus: I don't know how to answer that question because I don't know how else I could have done it. I don't want to sound flip about this but... I suppose the fact that I was the first woman to be a member of the Board of Rabbis in Chicago made it such that everybody knew me, or knew who I was, because I was the only woman for a long time. For the first six years that I lived here there were no other women on the Board of Tabbis. I knew that if I didn't go to a meeting there would be no women there, so there was that kind of motivation to be involved.

I think my involvement had more to do with the fact that I really hunger for *chevruta* and for study and I wanted to keep learning. So by going to rabbinic conferences or rabbinic meetings, that was an opportunity to study and to learn. Particularly in a place where I was kind of isolated, I couldn't do that by myself. So I got involved in the Board of Rabbis and I got involved in the CCAR for pretty much the same reason. I also loved to see my friends, so that's why I went to CCAR convention, among other things. I don't know with being a woman has to do... I don't know how to separate that from who I am.

Emily Huebscher: What did you feel were the greatest challenges to you?

Ellen Dreyfus: Early on, it was hard to find a job. I did have experiences where people wouldn't even interview me because I was female. A lot of the younger women don't realize what some of us went through. When I moved to Chicago, I didn't have a job. We moved here because my husband found a position, I wanted to come back to Chicago because that's where I grew up and I wanted to be near my family but I didn't have a job at first. I looked around and tried to apply to those positions that were open. In one case they would not even give me an interview. I have, in my file, a letter from a congregation saying that they had received my form or whatever from the placement department. In those days it was a very different system but there was a one-page form. They said they were really looking for someone with more youth experience. Now come on, I had been a camp counselor and a unit head and I had taught Sunday school and Hebrew school. Who did they want, Mickey Mouse? It was a ridiculous kind of thing. It was so blatantly false. They were just trying to grasp at something to say you have the wrong genitals.

In another case I was going to be denied an interview, I was told there was an assistantship open, and I applied for the position and was told that they wanted someone with more experience. At that point I was out of the college for five years. Granted I had only been working part-time, and in only one of those years I had worked as an assistant in a congregation, as I said I had been a hospital chaplain, I had done some other things, but I was told that they wanted someone with more experience. They were really looking perhaps for an associate or something, which I accepted until a couple of months later when I found out that they were interviewing seniors right out of the college. And then I got angry and I called

up the senior rabbi and I said, “I don’t think that I am being treated fairly.” He said, “What do you mean?” I said, “Well, you say that you want someone with more experience but you really don’t know anything about my experience. You don’t know about the management experience I had before I entered HUC, you don’t know about the different kinds of things that I did while I was at HUC, you don’t know any of these things, all you know is what’s on that piece of paper, and you’ll never know because you didn’t interview me. I think then he got nervous that I was going to sue him or something so he hastily put together an interview. He called me the next day and said, “We have arranged an interview (wait ‘till you hear this) on Saturday after services.” Can you imagine? (I should write this up someplace when all the people involved are dead.) I couldn’t say no at that point so I changed my plans for Shabbat and I went there for services and I went into this mockery of an interview. There were 12 men and me in this room. They took pains to tell me that the woman on the committee was out of town and it was so clear that they had just done this so that I wouldn’t sue them or something. It was a sham. But, I had done my homework, I knew something about who was to be on the committee. My private joke was that a friend of mine told me that the president of the congregation was a real jerk. He said, “I don’t know how this guy ties his shoes when he gets up in the morning.” When I met the president, I looked down and he was wearing loafers. That was my private joke for the day. At some point, somebody actually said to me, “Oh, we notice that you’re a woman. How do you think that that will affect how you are as a rabbi?” It was just sort of an absurd thing. Finally somebody said to me, “Well, what kind of compensation would you require?” You don’t ask a question like that at a first interview. I mean, it’s just not done. So I smiled sweetly and said, “I’d rather not discuss money on *Shabbas*.” Needless to say, they hired somebody right out of the college, somebody with the correct genitalia, and somebody who was the same height as the senior rabbi, I was considerably taller. End of story.

I don’t know how I got to that. I guess I got to that from some of the frustrations, was that the question?

Emily Huebscher: Mhm.

Ellen Dreyfus: It was very frustrating to know that I was capable and was being denied access because I was a woman. That was very frustrating to me. The other frustrating thing was just the process of being able to combine a career and a family. Which also was, to some extent, uncharted territory. A lot of us were struggling with this in the 80’s, women in lots of professions were trying to figure out how to do this in the 70’s and 80’s. There was kind of backlash or mixed messages going around, let’s put it that way, that we were going to be short-changing out children by working outside of the home. That was always frustrating to try to figure out how, even though I wasn’t working full time when my kids were little, how I could do enough that I was still a rabbi and still functioning as a rabbi but also giving my kids what they needed.

I remember when my daughter was about two. I was downstairs in the basement doing laundry and she was playing with the dress-up box. She took out a hat and put a bag over her shoulder and something and she turned to her doll and said, “You stay here with the babysitter, I’m going to a meeting.” [Laughs] So, it’s hard to do everything. It’s hard to know when quality time is really quality or when there is enough time to do what you need to do. That was a frustration.

I do believe that I did ok. My kids are grown now, they are wonderful people. God willing I will be a grandma next month, my daughter is pregnant. I think my kids feel like they grew

up in a good home with good parents. One of my favorite feedback moments was when my daughter was taking an adolescent psychology course in college and called home and said, "You guys did ok." [Laughs] But look, that's much more important than whether I'm successful on a pulpit, quite frankly. That's the real thing.

Emily Huebscher: What aspect of the rabbinate do you enjoy the most?

Ellen Dreyfus: I said early on that I get bored easily and so I like to do a variety of things and I really do like a whole lot of different things. I do love the fact that as a rabbi I get to share crucial moments in people's lives and that I have the great *zichut* and privilege and honor of bringing God and Torah into those moments. That's just such a blessing. I love that. Whether that is a baby naming or bar or *bat mitzvah* or funeral for that matter, or just ... Those are very significant moments. I love teaching. I love seeing the light bulb go on over the head of my students, whether it's a little kid at tot Shabbat or an octogenarian in a Torah study class. I love when I can lead people in prayer and feel like they're there and they're with me and they're moving in the same direction and that I'm helping them on their spiritual journey. I like giving a good sermon and getting a response. It really is a lot of everything.

Emily Huebscher: What is it about you that made you able to succeed as a pioneer?

Ellen Dreyfus: I really didn't want to be a pioneer, I told you at the beginning that I rejected that idea, that I didn't want to go into this for whatever thrill factor there would be in being a woman rabbi. I wasn't interested... I didn't like this first woman stuff. But I guess I'm pretty stubborn.

Early on I did not see myself as a success. And I think working all those years part time I felt well, I'll do my little thing and that will be that and I won't ever get any recognition in the rabbinate and that's ok. I was resigned to that. Which is what it was doubly shocking when I ended up getting to be nominated to be president of the Conference.

How was I able to succeed? If I were less modest I would say, well I'm good, why not? I think I'm intelligent and I relate well to people and I care deeply about Judaism and I want to communicate that and transmit my joy of learning to people.

Emily Huebscher: What advice do you have for future rabbis?

Ellen Dreyfus: Don't stop learning. I think that's one of the most important things. That we've got to keep learning and we've got to keep growing and we shouldn't get stuck in a rut of whatever it is. Whether it's a traditional notion about success, whether it's this is what I thought my life was supposed to be and so this is how I'm going to do things, or thinking that we know everything. We just have to keep learning and growing. I joke sometimes that I am masquerading as an adult. I still think of myself as a kid and I still think of myself as someone who is growing. That would be my advice. I guess the other half of that is don't let other people's definitions restrict you.

Emily Huebscher: Thank you so much for talking with me.

Ellen Dreyfus: It's a pleasure.

**Interviewer:** Emily Huebscher, 5<sup>th</sup> year student HUC

**With:** Rabbi Cathy L. Felix, 1980

**Date:** February 18, 2010

Emily Huebscher: Rabbi Felix?

Cathy Felix: Speaking, Hi Emily.

Emily Huebscher: Thank you so much for agreeing to speak to me. I want to remind you I am recording this conversation for the archives. I'll begin by asking when you first thought of becoming a rabbi.

Cathy Felix: I thought about it as a small child. My parents sent me to a Hebrew school, not a Hebrew school, I only went to a Sunday School but a Sunday School where the teachers were encouraged to expose us to Jewish rituals and when I was little I came home and I said there is this beautiful ceremony called *havdallah*, let's do *havdallah*, and my parents were so horrified they pulled me out of that school, it was way too Jewish for them; but it was always something that intrigued me. Even back then.

Emily Huebscher: Cool. Do you consider yourself a feminist and how you define feminism?

Cathy Felix: Definitely I am a feminist 100% I am a feminist and I would define feminism as the movement to bring women into the public sphere on an equal footing as men.

Emily Huebscher: Has that definition changed throughout your rabbinate?

Cathy Felix: I don't think the fundament has, my sense about do women bring unique gifts, I go back an forth with that idea but the fundamental about women in the public sphere and the need for equal pay and equal respect and equal acknowledgment that has not changed in my life.

Emily Huebscher: Do women bring unique gifts?

Cathy Felix: I think two things, I think first individuals very much bring a set of unique gifts and that women are marked when they exploit ideas that are seen as feminine and my example for that is that when I was in rabbinical school I took a year off and I was an intern, an assistant to a male rabbi in Washington, DC and this male rabbi had a closet full of different *talitot* of different colors and different forms. Every Shabbat he would come and open up his closet and pick out a different *tallit* and I came down without my personal *tallit* which you probably can tell from the first story I told you, so he told me, go into my closet pick out a *tallit* for services so I picked out a *tallit*, a yellow one that matched my yellow outfit that evening and wore my *tallit*. And a woman came up to me after to services and said, oh rabbi, what a beautiful *tallit* you are wearing. You bring much a feminist sensibility to our services, it's so nice to have you. So a custom that the male rabbi had been upholding there for years when I did it, was read in a totally different way, so I think there's that aspect. That even though we all come as individuals, because of our societal patriarchal structures the individual gifts a women brings are read differently than what a male brings. So I think there's that aspect, and I think just in general, I don't know if it's, you know, nature or nurture, but I think there is a whole way that women are different in the world than men, and that therefore women bring a different skill set than men do to the position. I think it's both.

Emily Huebscher: Can you describe the role that being a woman played in your rabbinate?

Cathy Felix : At some point it was easier and some points it was definitely harder. For example when I was in Boston looking for a position it was clear that there were some congregations that liked the idea of having a woman because it kind of established their liberal creds, it was perceived as a cutting-edge, liberal step to take that position of hiring a woman. I certainly have worked with enough traditional men who have been uncomfortable with my authority and my leadership as a rabbi to know that there's also that flip side as well. ...and an occasional woman who's uncomfortable with a female rabbi.

Emily Huebscher: How did your gender affect your liturgical choices and sermons?

Cathy Felix: I am struggling with that question. I think my liturgical choices are very rooted in my personality, which tends to prefer if you look at kind of the Meyers-Briggs different categories of personality, my liturgical choices very much flow out of my personality of enjoying more spontaneous, contemporary prayer.

Emily Huebscher: What's your Myers-Briggs personality. (described MBTI)

Cathy Felix : INFP, so my P means I tend to prefer spontaneity, and variety of alternative worship services so I think it comes out of kind of my personality more than being a more gendered... I mean, in terms of sermons though I certainly am very conscious of women's issues whether its domestic violence, or the issues of maintaining accessibility to abortions so I bring that sensibility to my sermons. So I do bring that to sermons more than my liturgical choices.

Emily Huebscher: Did you introduce any women's rituals in your rabbinate?

Cathy Felix: Absolutely I've tried to do women's... a Rosh Chodesh group. And I feel its very important to give women their own space, so I tried Rosh Chodesh group, I've tried a book group, so absolutely.

Emily Huebscher: Were you conscious of making any other choices in your rabbinate based on gender?

Cathy Felix: Amazingly so, because part of my whole life path is that I really only worked for many years in a part time capacity which is totally because I chose to limit my professional responsibilities in light of my family responsibilities, having and raising my children. It's actually been huge in terms of my whole career path and I was very, very conflicted about that because I'm sure as you've talked to other women in my class, many of my colleagues did not make that choice and have chosen to work full time even as they were raising a family so I felt it was very... it was not particularly valued, my attempt to work part time and maintain a stronger position, a more full time position in my home that was not particular a stance that was valued, either by society or by the peers I was in touch with but it was an important and correct decision for me and a huge decision. That was one aspect was choosing to work part time, and the second aspect since I was working part time one of the implications of that was that my husband's full time position was our primary source of income, which meant that we moved to follow my husband's positions not my positions except for our first move, so in terms of where we have lived as a family over the past 29 years, except for our first move, has been much more dependent on my husband's professional needs than on my professional needs. And even now as my children are grown and I could theoretically look for something full time, we have chosen to stay in the community where we're currently living so I'm actually very much bounded by our geographical location and therefore I'm very much limited as to the professional opportunities that I am willing to entertain. So I'm affected in huge, huge, huge ways by my decisions through life based on my being a woman.

Emily Huebscher: What pressures were unique to you as a pioneer?

Cathy Felix: I think there was times where times when people were not as supportive and I think even today people are not, depending on what privately how people were raised or what they experienced in their own workplace I think, the image of women as an authority figure, as a leader, I have found that has not... sorry, what was your original language....

I think that was definitely so, and actually I... it happened very fast, my first position I was a chaplain at Brown University and the first year the president had a reception before the first semester began and the parents of first year students so as part of that introductory few days while the parents and students were still on campus, the president had a reception and my first year there it was all like, "oh, a woman rabbi I've never knew there was such a thing." And you could like see people put in their brain, like you could see them put their constellation of women images and their constellations of rabbi images and see them kind of melding them together for the first time. But by my third year there, it was already like, "oh, a woman rabbi, oh yeah, my second cousin in Houston has a friend who's got a woman rabbi" so, very fast people had already heard of it and knew about it, so the knowing was so quick and that was a fascinating thing; but like the acceptance of it, I think is something that women still struggle with. I'm not 100% but I think that women rabbis today are still not paid in parity with male rabbis. I think these are ongoing issues.

Emily Huebscher: What are you basing that on? ... the pay discrepancy?

Cathy Felix: I think people feel women don't deserve as much, that men are supporting families, women don't advocate for themselves as effectively, men come into the negotiation feeling that they [women] don't deserve as much, you know, all the host of issues, women have either worked part time or taken off to be with their family. There's all sorts of different components I think that go into that.

Emily Huebscher: You haven't found any data to back you up, have you? I would love some.

Cathy Felix: I would talk to Lenny Saul in the placement department, to see what he can tell you about that.

Emily Huebscher: Ok. So I'm wondering if you were conscious of changes in the rabbinate and what changes you attribute to women?

Cathy Felix: I mean there's been a whole generational change in the rabbinate that I see. I see two changes, one is the big congregations, they used to want like a preacher and a leader like Roland Gittleson in Boston, or what was that guys name in New Jersey, Ely Kilchic, I think, in New Jersey; these great orators and commanding presences and now large congregations are looking for pastors and people who can relate to other people and I don't know how much of that is related to gender at all. The second thing that I do think is related to gender, when I went to school there was a clear line of success; a successful rabbi was ordained and became an assistant and then maybe took a middle-size congregation and then became the rabbi of huge congregation and that was a true success path. And I think one of the gifts that women have given the rabbinate is to say, no, there are many different ways of being a rabbi and that there are many different career paths and somebody could choose never to want to be in a large congregation for all sorts of reasons and people could end up in all different places, it isn't a question of going to the association meeting and say, "who's is bigger?" and I think part of that whole transition has to do with the presence of women in the field

Emily Huebscher: What do you think is the measure of success now?

Cathy Felix: You know I think it's... I think it's become more decentralized, even who is considered a publically successful rabbi, certainly there are a handful of rabbis on Rav.com who always give when they speak, give insightful, wise information and advice. I think that there are people whose reputations have been built on their internet responses. So there clearly there are rabbis who have had successes in large congregations as always; there are rabbis who are known for their social action or different aspect of the rabbinate. In terms of people who are published, who have become scholars, so I think even within the public valuing of rabbis there's been kind of a decentralization that has gone on.

Emily Huebscher: My next section is on the superficial image of women rabbis. I read an article by Joy Levette. The navy blue suit goddess continuum. Where are you?

Cathy Felix: First of all it's fascinating, what hit me as you were talking about that is that I read an article that talk about how women have no unmarked form. If a man wants to be unmarked at work he comes to work in a suit and tie and that's kind of considered the baseline, but you're right, women have no baseline. Are we really... I think I really evolved with that. In the beginning, we all kind of started out in our suits, and I actually had such a striking experience because for my senior sermon, this was just naivety this wasn't the determination that I was going to evoke the goddess in people, but for my senior sermon, you know I was a student, it wasn't as though I had already accumulated a professional wardrobe, so I looked in my closet and I had this beautiful fire engine red dress that I loved that was sleeveless and it was fire engine red and I thought I looked just terrific in it, so I wore this dress and most of the conversation afterwards that it was sleeveless and there I was up on the *bima* and it evoked all these things in people that I had been totally unconscious of so it was interesting when I took this year off I said to the senior rabbi, here we are in Washington DC it's the end of August it's really hot down here, do I have to appear on the *bima* in hose, and he said to me well you've got to decide if you want people talking about your sermon or if you want people talking about you're bare-legged up there. Oh, that's a good point. So you asked what it meant to be a pioneer, I think kind of the price we paid to not to have people discussing that superficial aspect was that... well I don't know how general it is, but I found in my life, that coming out in the navy blue suit was a helpful way to get people to focus more on my message and less on what was on my back. As more women have come out there and as I have become much more comfortable in my rabbinate I have become much more comfortable in what I wear. I'm neither a goddess or navy blue suit I'm kind of a pants and sweater type of person I try to cultivate a more casual informal persona in my congregation so I'm in neither of those poles.

Emily Huebscher: What were some of the challenges you faced, other challenges, you faced in creating your rabbinic image early on. How you got peoples images to meld, you said you could see them melding.

Cathy Felix: When I first started out, I was a very young; whenever I was ordained, I was emotionally young and kind of green, besides being chronologically young, so there was a whole aspect of my needing to find my own voice as a rabbi. You know different from... once I was a student and I had spent so many years being a student and successfully a student and then making that transition to find out how I was going to rabbinate. And that was an interesting transition... And people would mistake me for a student who didn't know me, so learning how to take the authority that people wanted me to assert for me personally was an issue for me when I first started out.

Emily Huebscher: Do you look for models more in professional women or rabbinical men?

Cathy Felix: My first positions were all on college campuses and I was very fortunate to be mentored by some male professors. I had female grad students kind of my age women as friends but I had a couple of male professors who were mentors for me and actually, now that I think about it, also a male rabbi who was a mentor for me. I guess, yes. Actually I've got a... I've got a friend who's also a female rabbi who's just finished up last year and that was really striking to talk to her and she said, oh, I had all these women who were rabbis who are my mentors, it was just really amazing, so looking back I can see that would have been a helpful thing but that was who it was.

Emily Huebscher: Do you have any other stories about people commenting on the way you looked.

Cathy Felix: No, but I was very conscious of it and after I got married you know and asking my husband oh, is this blouse cut too short, too low, I was very conscious of all of that. Actually, I do have one story, when I first came here when people were sick I did some substitutions, some fill in work for people in the community. I went to one congregation and there was a woman *hazan* so we led the service and she came up afterwards and she said, oh, I notice you're wearing shoes with no toes, and I had been noticing, she was well built and how low cut her dress was. So I thought, this is fascinating she's worried my toesies are showing and I think her tits are like totally inappropriate for a professional woman.

I really have been very fortunate that way to not get a lot of flak for a sense about how I should appear. But it was really amazing, when I went back for my DD, I guess a year ago now, two years ago now, my class... this is a ceremony in late spring, late May or early June, all the women in my class, we were all in our hose, we had already had that lesson, right, but the masters students were just current students who were a generation younger and none of them had hose on, they were all just in sandals with bare legs. I don't know if I commented to my peers, but I noticed in my head oh my goodness, we've really gone through a major transition, a whole degree of casualness in American society what never would have been considered as acceptable 25 years ago is now done without thinking. I think that's the other aspect of why the navy blue suit disappeared; American life is so much more casual now. My people don't dress up for services even if I dressed up they don't dress up unless it's a bar mitzvah and they come inappropriately in gowns. So that's an interesting thing. That reminds me, I officiated at a wedding and I came in a blazer and the groom was disappointed that I was not more formally dressed for his wedding, but it goes back to like that sense that there's no unmarked form if I'd been a male in a business suit, I don't think he wouldn't be disappointed that the male wasn't in a tux. But since women's clothes are so much more variable, you're free to make comments and judgments like that. What does it mean she's a goddess, does she wear flowy gowns. That's fascinating.

Emily Huebscher: Article you were referencing, the author. No. That's ok I'll look on Google.

Emily Huebscher: Shaped what future female rabbis would look like?

Cathy Felix: I definitely had a sense of myself as pioneer not a sense as a group. I didn't have much of a connection to other women in my class. And as a matter of fact, There's a local reform chapter of rabbis and I came to them and I said I'm working 10 hours a week cause I have babies at home, would it be ok if I came.

BREAK IN AUDIO RECORDING

## PART 2

Cathy Felix: You asked me about my group consciousness I said I didn't think I had any I received disappointment at the hand of my fellow co-female contemporaries but I certainly do have a sense of pioneering in the rabbinate.

Emily Huebscher: Assumptions were made about you as a female rabbi.

Cathy Felix: One of the assumptions was that it was so radical to have a woman that I would be therefore be liberal about religious decisions that I would of course officiate at intermarriages or gay commitment ceremonies, that, of course, I wouldn't care how kosher the kitchen is, so I think one of the stereotype that I personally have come across that since I had transgressed this boundary of the maleness of the rabbinate that I'm therefore interested in transgressing other boundaries in Judaism.

Emily Huebscher: Last section on professional realities. Greatest success?

Cathy Felix: I think every time I officiate at a *bar mitzvah* or a *bat mitzvah* and the family comes away feeling that it was a positive experience, I can't think of anything better than that. Or having a wedding and people writing back, sending me a note how beautiful the ceremony was or how moving the funeral was. I guess the life cycles, I really find those incredibly satisfying and my services I really, really, really love leading services and I get a lot of personal satisfaction week in/week out, leading Shabbat services.

Emily Huebscher: What are the ways being a woman facilitated your success?

Cathy Felix: It's hard to conceive what my life would have been like if I wasn't a woman, I think I was born under a lucky star, I think I had a lot of wonderful opportunities. My work in the rabbinate has permitted me to grow as a professional, it has opened avenues for me to grow emotionally and spiritually, it's given me the space to raise my family and to be supportive of my husband in his life's journey. So I think that as a woman, my rabbinate was really.... It would be hard to conceive how all the different variables that would be different if I were different. I really feel blessed the positions that I have had and the places I have been, you know, all the difficulties I have had as well as the high points on the way, it has been a very blessed journey and I can't complain about it.

Emily Huebscher: What do you feel were the greatest challenges

Cathy Felix: Sense of leadership and authority both me being willing especially in the early years, being willing to claim that leadership and authority and even not for that leadership and authority to be universally acknowledged and recognized. I had a congregant who ended up leaving the congregation who said you know I grew up with male rabbis and I really don't believe in female rabbis. So he was right out there with that, but I think that's a real continuum, you know that even people who aren't as vocal about that have issues about it, kind of like anti-Semitism, even people who think they don't have issues about given the fact that we're living in the patriarchal society these people have issues with it also even if they think the do not.

Emily Huebscher: Very positive.

Cathy Felix: Role Models, I have to say now that I think about your question and it's rolling around. Laura Gellar a couple of years ahead of me, she was just so wonderful, she was just great. She facilitated meetings that I went to and she was great in her professional role and she was going to be a star even back in rabbinic school; that was clear. And now she's Rabbi of this major congregation out in California somewhere, and personally she really took time with me and mentored me and so as I'm thinking now, did I have mentors. She was definitely a mentor for me and I really admire her greatly for the work

she's done over the years. I wanted to go back to that question. Sorry I was thinking about that.

Emily Huebscher: I had asked experience positive or Negative

Cathy Felix: Definitely more positive. It has given me the room to grow and develop as a professional and a human being. Allowed me to value my Judaism and teach Jud and it's been a very positive experience for me

Emily Huebscher: Enjoy the most?

Cathy Felix: Very much leading services.

Emily Huebscher: What about you made you able to succeed

Cathy Felix: I'm totally tenacious, once I hit on a path I'm a total bull dog; once I really settle on it come hell or high water I'm going to pursue that path. Once I figured that out I was really determined to do it. One aspect I was very tenacious about it. On the other side I was totally flexible about it I really did not come into rabbinical school with any set ideas about where I wanted to end up as a rabbi, what aspect of the rabbinate I was interested; I really have been able to do a variety of things, I've working on college campuses and I have worked in congregations and when my children were young I worked in Federation so I was always very open and flexible in terms of how my personal life, not my personal life, how my own life is unfolding in the world and since I was able to be more flexible with that and a little bit more trusting about where divine spirit in the world was sending me I have been able to move into the next step of my life whatever that might be. So, life is unfolding and I look forward to watching it unfold around me.

Emily Huebscher: Advice

Cathy Felix: Learn who you are because ultimately we bring to our cong or our own authenticity our own being clear who we are and what our values are our clarity will help the people we work with more clear in their own live. I think that sense of finding ones own voice is the critical aspect I'd want to pass on to future generations.

**Interviewer: Emily Huebscher, 5<sup>th</sup> year student HUC**

**With: Rabbi Helene Ferris, 1981**

**Date: January 25, 2010**

Emily Huebscher: Hi Rabbi Ferris?

Helene Ferris: Emily, can you wait just one second? I'm taking my coffee upstairs so I can sit next to the computer and see the questions you want to ask.

Emily Huebscher: Would you like me to call back in a few minutes.

Helene Ferris: No. So when I went to school umpteen years ago, theses were due in January or pretty much, almost finished by that time.

Emily Huebscher: Well I'm not going through placement so it's made things a little bit more easy.

Helene Ferris: You're not going through placement?

Emily Huebscher: I'm not

Helene Ferris: Which means... Tell me.

Emily Huebscher: I'm just looking for other things to do for a year.

Helene Ferris: Oh, ok.

Emily Huebscher: Yeah

Helene Ferris: Great.

Emily Huebscher: It should be exciting.

Helene Ferris: So how did you come upon this topic.

Emily Huebscher: It's something that's interested me for a while. Understanding how people became women rabbis.

Helene Ferris: Sally Preisand?

Emily Huebscher: Yes, I've met her.

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Helene Ferris: It is because of her, that I'm a rabbi.

Emily Huebscher: I read that, and I read that you succeeded her at Stephen Wise Free Synagogue.

Helene Ferris: Correct. I was sitting on my porch in June of 1972.... Let me just pull you up here. OK got it, I want to see all these questions you want to ask me.

OK. All right I'm ready, go ahead. I was sitting on my porch I had three kids at the time. I don't know if you know I was the first old lady Rabbi. I was ordained when I was 44. Have you looked at the archives in Cincinnati?

Emily Huebscher: I have; yes,

Helene Ferris: There were tapes of all of us.

Emily Huebscher: I haven't watched all the tapes but I know they exist.

Helene Ferris: So It was June 4, 1972 and I saw there were women rabbis. And I went Whoo, I didn't know this could be possible. I always loved... I don't know, I was kind of strange. I loved Friday night services at camp- sleep away camp. I loved going to services when my parents went. Actually, my mother never went, my father did. And I thought, well, I'm a teacher, maybe I can do this. And I had a mentor that was very supportive and that was Jack Stern in Scarsdale. And it all came together. That was in '72, my youngest was 3 and I waited until she was in first grade, I believe and applied.

Emily Huebscher: Why did you wait?

Helene Ferris: Because she was too young.

Emily Huebscher:: Ah

Helene Ferris: Having to go to Israel when she was that little would have been a little difficult, I thought. Actually I had to cook the idea in my own self.

Emily Huebscher: I'm curious about the role being a women played in your rabbinate, were you conscious of that at all?

Helene Ferris: Oh yea, how.. laughter... how can I put this. Can you filter out what should be filtered out when I talk to you, are our names going to be included...

Emily Huebscher: Whatever you feel most comfortable with... if you can be candid with me that would be the best. And I can put it in the archives not to be listened to for another 20 years. Whatever you're comfortable with.

Helene Ferris: Ok then I'll have to watch my step. All right. So... I became the assistant at Steven Wise Free Synagogue. It wasn't right after Sally, it must have been... let's see, I don't know exactly when she left but it had to be a least two years before I came in. I had a senior rabbi who I think hired me because I just had the reputation for giving so much and I think he needed that because he was never there. I don't know if that has anything to do with being a woman, but you know we women are told to please, please everybody, do what everybody wants you to do, and I think that was part of it, personally. So I did everything I could do, I was asked, they were having financial difficulties, they asked me to run the school and it was just unbelievably difficult and I finally had to say I can't do it, and I was told I couldn't do it because I wouldn't give up my Rabbinic role, well ps I couldn't give up my Rabbinic role because the senior Rabbi was never there, or rarely there, let's put it that way. When it came time that he was going to retire and I had been there 10 years, they... you know, I hit that glass ceiling. I left and I came... Well not right away did I come to Croton, I was out from July to November,

Emily Huebscher: Was it difficult to find a job in that time?

Helene Ferris: No, I had applied to other places but this was probably the pulpit of my dreams. It was in Westchester County where I had lived all my life. And the people were wonderful; I never had difficulty with people, well I shouldn't say never, but rare difficulties.

But getting back to being a women.... I think I was hired at Croton because I was a woman and because I was an older woman. I was 54, I succeeded a man who had difficulties dealing with women in the area, I should say he didn't have difficulties dealing with women in the area, he was let go because of a scandal.

So I think they were very happy to have a woman, and an older woman, because they probably said, we're not going to have that trouble with her. So that where being a woman came in very handy. I said I can't do anything about it.

So, it was a great run. And I retired at 69, I'd tell them I was in my 70<sup>th</sup> year, it sounded better. So, I live right near the synagogue. It's my synagogue. My successor was a wonderful woman whom I mentored into the rabbinate.

Feminism, I see as advocating for leveling the field for women in this world. Like affirmative action for women...

Emily Huebscher: I know that you gave a sermon this year on women's rights.

Helene Ferris: I sure did. How did you know that?

Emily Huebscher: I did my homework.

Helene Ferris: Was it on the web site of the synagogue?

Emily Huebscher: It was.

Helene Ferris: You know I grew up, Emily, in a very old fashioned home where women were to stay home and the usual pre-Betty Freedan stuff. And my mother wanted to work, my mother would have been 100 years old this month. So in that generation, and I'm 72, we were not supposed to work, we were supposed to have good manners, look pretty, do the nice thing, the right thing. And I remember when I wanted to work, my father, he was a dentist, my father said, what would people think if my daughter has to work. So I accepted that and it wasn't until I came into the world as a Rabbi, as a human being and looked around me and realized that women were not being treated very well. And I saw more and more of this, not so much in my rabbinate as in my learning about the world.

Emily Huebscher: And has that changed over the course of your rabbinate?

Helene Ferris: Yes, but not because of the rabbinate so much. No I have to say it did change. Well what changed, what are you referring to, the it?

Emily Huebscher: How you perceived your feminist identity.

Helene Ferris: No I don't think it changed so much for me personally. Well it changed as I came out into the world and I was in the Rabbinate and it was constantly changing. But... it was changing not so much for me personally the way I was treated, it changed the way I looked at the way women were treated in general. And the only time I really felt that I was looked upon as being too feminist that when I first came to the synagogue the *avot* didn't include the *imahot* and I wanted to change that and I'm not a very politically savvy person I just thought it was the right thing to do, and I went ahead and said I was going to do it and had a meeting but there was a petition against it and it wasn't until some of the leadership went to at that time UHAC biennial that they understood that this was where the movement was and I was right. That was a fight. I gave sermons, not as strong as the one I gave this past Yom Kippur, but I would write bulletin articles, maybe one on feminism or one on women and then I might have had one sermon in the first year but that was looked upon as my being too feminist and the brotherhood sent a delegation to talk to me about it.

Emily Huebscher: What did they say?

Helene Ferris: Oh you know too much women stuff. So at that time my husband left Brotherhood and hasn't been back since. Not in a bad way. He just didn't show up and said he didn't have time but that was the reason he didn't go back. It wasn't the rabbinate so much and it wasn't the synagogue leadership or the congregants that taught me a lot about how women are treated, it was my experience in the world. I had women come to me and talk about how their husbands treated them, I went to conferences... I heard stories from my colleagues. And of course, I was not in the birth-giving age, so I didn't personally go through that, but I just heard all these stories and I kept going wow, wow, I haven't been with it most of my life. I better wake up.

Emily Huebscher: Did you feel like a mother figure?

Helene Ferris: No.

I'll never forget one guy in my class; people would need a Kleenex or need a button sewn on or whatever.. and they would come to me.. and then I was accused of being too motherly. I laughed at it. But I'm sure that they did look at me obviously that way. But not many people.

Today, I would consider you a colleague. You are probably young enough to be my granddaughter But, I look at people not for their age, but because of what they have accomplished. I have a lot of young friends. I play tennis with them.

Emily Huebscher: That's better than my grandmother, I'll tell you that.

Helene Ferris: You're grandmother is my age.

Emily Huebscher: You're a little bit older; she doesn't play tennis.

Were you conscious about making any other choices in your rabbinate based on your gender?

Helene Ferris: I think one of my mistakes, but I didn't know it was a mistake at the time. Was when I was accused of being too feminist and there were too many women on the *bima* and we have a woman president and we have a woman this and a woman that. I consciously tried to have a male cantor, and I succeeded. Didn't work out so well. But.. that was something that shaped what I did in that area.

Emily Huebscher: How so?

Helene Ferris: Because I was tired of being told too many women on the *bima*, ...not in those words but in the feeling that maybe if there was a male clergy person they would stop... some of it was in jest, but some of it was annoying. But it was a mistake for me because we should have gotten the best person and they would have gotten used to it.. but.. so be it.

Emily Huebscher: And were you conscious of the changing Rabbinate when you were involved in it?

Helene Ferris: Yes. I was conscious of leadership wanting to be more open to the women. I wrote a maternity leave resolution even though I wasn't involved in that personally.

Helene Ferris: I remember the whole Roe vs. Wade issue and the resolution on that. And I brought in some things; I thought that was really important. I think as I became more aware of the unequal treatment of women I tried to become involved in social action stuff. Marching in Washington-- doing what I could. It doesn't hit me all of the things. But certainly trying to be out there and not being afraid of it, because when I came from Wise I wasn't the senior Rabbi but when I came here I had to form a lot of opinions on my own and not just do what my senior rabbi did.

Emily Huebscher: And did you notice that with the presence of women the rabbinate as a whole change?

Helene Ferris: Yes, yes, and I think it certainly changed for the better I see there are more nurturing young men out there. And I think more and more people expect the empathy that women are really good at having. Not that women aren't studious and good teachers of text, etcetera but I think it changed for the better because it allowed men to be more aware of their wives, their partners, women and their partners. I think it was important to see that nurturing and being compassionate and empathetic was very important in the job.

Emily Huebscher: So nurturing, compassion and empathy you think are traits that women brought to the Rabbinate.

Helene Ferris: Yes I do. And I think something else too, that came to mind as I was speaking. I'm sure you've studied the change from the Pittsburg Platform to the Principals of '99.

Emily Huebscher: Ok

Helene Ferris: I have a theory I cannot prove ever. The change in the Reform Movement came about because the predominance of women, young women, older women like me too but not as much, women who came from traditional backgrounds who were not allowed to do what the Reform Movement was going to allow them to do, and the women I believe were the underlying force in the Movement to come back to tradition because it was

women who couldn't do what they really wanted to do as far as tradition was concerned. That makes sense?

So these women who grew up not being able to do certain things wanted the permission of the Reform Movement to do them and so changed the Movement to more traditional.

I think changed it to include tradition. I think the movement to include more tradition in Reform, the change from the Classical to the more traditional Movement we are today had a lot to do with women, had a lot to do with their needing to express themselves, in a way that whether they subconsciously or consciously knew their grandmothers couldn't do. And I feel so strongly about that when I read... from time to time I'm asked to teach today I taught reform Judaism at the Jewish Home and Hospital down in the Bronx, I haven't said it yet because we haven't gotten to that part, but I'll tell them I feel very strongly about the women Rabbi's influence on the change toward tradition.

Emily Huebscher: What assumptions were made about you as a female?

Helene Ferris: Rabbi? I don't really know. Me personally, I have a very low-key style and I think that was assumed to be because I was female.

Emily Huebscher: You said that because you were female people didn't think there would be problems

Emily Huebscher: Article describing the navy blue suit or the goddess. The Barnard issue alumnae. I know Joy. Navy blue suit – the same as a man. The Goddess – is the opposite. If that is a continuum, where to do fit on it.

Helene Ferris: In the middle, I would say kind of in the middle. I did wear suits, but not men's suits. Not like a bride and groom in who's in the wedding I officiated at, the bride and the groom wore exactly the same blue pin striped suit white blouse, white shirt, red tie, exactly the same.

My suits weren't to mimic the male Rabbis. I came from that generation that if you were doing a professional job, you dressed like a professional.

Emily Huebscher: Decisions in choosing your attire for the Rabbinate.

Helene Ferris: I think professional women would dress that way. I don't wear pants on the *bima* but I do wear pants suits. I feel better when I dress that way because that's how I would dress for a college conference. My mother dressed that way even though she wasn't a professional.

Emily Huebscher: How you dress, spoke or behaved because of your gender.

Helene Ferris: Only because I copied my parents' generation when women went out to dinner or a show. I dated wearing glove. It had to do with being a female, but that's the way I was brought up.

Emily Huebscher: Do you think that you shaped the image of the female rabbi.

Helene Ferris: Nah. I was so much older Sally who's ordained 9 years before me, No leaving out some of the newer second career rabbis today, but then, we're talking about '72-81, I don't think people looked to me, people would remark how I dressed, but not because I was a Rabbi. But I don't think I influenced anybody.

Emily Huebscher: Do you think that in the course of your rabbinate the roles of women rabbis changed at all?

Helene Ferris: Sure. Younger women today are more willing to speak up for themselves. Society is getting used to women speaking up for themselves. Way back then they weren't so used to women speaking up for themselves.

Women are also modeling, well Sally didn't have a family, their family comes first, their husband's are involved in family, in parenting. Those are the two big things I see.

Emily Huebscher: Do you think there was anything unique about your rabbinate in being one of the first.

Helene Ferris: I guess It was harder, but I didn't realize how much harder it I remember one of my classmates. Are you calling Leah Kroll in Israel? She has a California number. Leah Kroll was the first female rabbi who had given birth, oh no Ellen Dreyfus also, but Leah was in my class and she was the first. Ellen graduated before me. And she was nursing her daughter and one of the professors didn't know how to deal with it. He was a professor who used to keep walking around looking at people and he didn't move from one spot, but he couldn't deal with seeing a nursing student. I don't know about nursing students today

Emily Huebscher: I think it's still a challenge.

Helene Ferris: There were a lot of firsts back then. So much has changed. Not only what we do, it's the way we perceive ourselves and the way people perceive us and that I can't talk for anybody else but myself. When I go to the senior living facility, most of the women in their 90's or 80's are traditional. 'Cause it's a Jewish home and hospital and they'll still ask the questions like what do they call the husband of a female rabbi.

Emily Huebscher: I know that your husband says, "Lucky".

Helene Ferris: Very good. You've really done your homework. So you know there's still that generation there.

Emily Huebscher: What were some of the common questions people asked when you said you were becoming a Rabbi.

Helene Ferris: Really I didn't know there were woman rabbis. Should we call you by your name. Women rabbi's used to be called by their first names, Rabbi Sally. Is your husband a rabbi? Some not so nice things. Sexual things. But that doesn't happen today. 44 wasn't so different from 27, I don't think.

Emily Huebscher: Do you get questions any more?

Helene Ferris: What made you become a rabbi. Did you come from a religious family?

Emily Huebscher: Did people comment about your image about how you looked?

Helene Ferris: They still do. People who aren't Jewish. I wear a *kippa* when I'm at the prison, I do prison work, or when I go to the Jewish home, or a baby naming.

Emily Huebscher: Any comments in inappropriate ways.

Helene Ferris: When I was younger.

Emily Huebscher: Ways in which being a woman facilitated your success.

Helene Ferris: Succeeding a womanizer, who didn't know how to behave with women. Being an older Rabbi certainly helped me when they came to choose between me and a man in my congregation now. When I first began, it was kind of the beginning of the Jewish awareness of being a woman because there were women Rabbis and therefore a lot of young people who were getting married that wanted to impress their friends with the fact they were so liberal they had a woman do their ceremony.

Emily Huebscher: Did you mind being shown off like that?

Helene Ferris: No. Because they were honest about it. We're happy that you're a woman. I'm happy I'm a woman too.

Emily Huebscher: Also at Funerals. At first I know that Sally was not asked to do funerals, because God forbid, just in case if our dead one's soul won't be floating around in the

heavens if a woman officiates but that changed and it changed with me because the feminist movement caught on and then there were people who wanted me because their mother was the head of the feminist movement; in other words or they had an older woman in the family who was a lawyer or a doctor who if she could have been, would have been x, y z, and so isn't it great that you're going to officiate, she would have loved it. Things like that did occur.

Emily Huebscher: Challenges because you were a woman.

Helene Ferris: You know when I was at Steven Wise the people just viewed the media, and people in general viewed a Rabbi as someone with a booming voice and an assertive kind of person, and there are woman like that, which is great, but it's different, I admire that, but I was not that way. I think I was looked upon as.. And I was compared to my senior Rabbi. By most people favorably, but by some you know, ...she doesn't boom out her sermons and she gets on the radio in an interview, she's very of quiet. They wanted more masculine traits. That was one of the reasons why I didn't succeed my senior rabbi... because I wasn't like him.

Emily Huebscher: And you said that you hit the glass ceiling there. Did people say that explicitly?

Helene Ferris: No. But they had made up their mind made up that they were going to have a man. They did they had 3 or 4 of them until now. No women were allowed or I don't think were even considered. Because of New York congregation, I don't know there are any women seniors in the New York congregations. They have kind of arrogant image of themselves.

Emily Huebscher: Still?

Helene Ferris: Oh yes. Yet there are many women rabbis there, but not seniors. I know there are seniors around the country. There are seniors in LA. Amy Schwartzman in Falls Church. And if they are seniors now they started with small congregations that grew. But seniors who come into large congregations and they take them over the men. Very few. Hope they'll be more and more. They certainly are a lot of capable people out there. But it isn't happening.

Emily Huebscher: Would you consider your experience more positive or negative.

Helene Ferris: Very much more positive.

Emily Huebscher: How much of your experience was related to your gender.

Helene Ferris: It was just because I did a good job. I used to tease everybody I can go around kissing everybody, older women aren't sexual, the general population doesn't think of us that way. But that's another topic. That's for your doctorate Emily.

Emily Huebscher: What do you think was your greatest success as a Rabbi?

Helene Ferris: I think helping people to understand that, helping each person believe that he or she had a special place in this world. And that no matter what happens they were created in God's image and had the spark of God inside of them, and no matter what terrible things happened in their lives, they could still make a contribution in God's world. That's a theme I spoke about this in many ways. I spoke about divorce, loneliness, tragedy. I just hope that I'm right. That's what I hope to have been my gift.

Emily Huebscher: What made it possible for you to succeed as a pioneer woman rabbi?

Helene Ferris: Support from my family. My kids went with me to Jerusalem the first year, they were 12, 9 and 7. They were amazing. Some difficult day but they stayed there the whole yea And of course my husband was so supportive. He was a feminist from

way back. He really believed that women should be treated equally. He behaved in that way. Wasn't just lip service.

Emily Huebscher: Was there anything special about you that made you able to succeed.

Helene Ferris: Faith. Believing deep down in my gut that I was called to do this. I know it sounds very Christian but I don't think it is.

Emily Huebscher: I don't think so either.

Helene Ferris: That day that I read that Sally Priesand had been ordained as the first woman, was the probably the most spiritual, thought-provoking, in depth, God-like experience because it struck my soul... and I just knew that was what I was going to do. And of course I had my husband and my kids and my rabbi in Scarsdale who supported me. My decision, but it couldn't have been done without them.

Emily Huebscher: Do you have any advice for future rabbis.

Helene Ferris: Listen... listen to your soul. Just be the person God wants you to be. And. Define your Rabbinate according to what you think it should be. Yes, listen to others, but the bottom line is to listen to yourself, that should

**Interviewer: Emily Huebscher, 5<sup>th</sup> year student HUC**

**With: Rabbi Karen L. Fox, 1978**

**Date: February 9, 2010**

Emily Huebscher: When you first thought about becoming a rabbi?

Karen Fox: Middle of college when I was around 20 and that would be 1970-1.

Emily Huebscher: What influenced your decision?

Karen Fox: I saw a couple of men doing their life as a rabbi and enjoying it and seeming to have a very positive influence in the world and Jewish world and so that appealed to me. I had worked at camp Swig which is a UAHC camp near San Francisco and enjoyed it and it was important to me as a Jewish kid coming from Orange County in LA I have holocaust survivor parents and so finding myself at camp and getting to do good Jewish work good experience my home rabbi Chaim Asa was also an influence and Richard Levi who was Hillel director at UCLA was a positive influence And it was a time of lots of change in society and the belief you would change to make the world a better place.

Emily Huebscher: Do you consider yourself a fem how do you define feminism?

Karen Fox: I think I define myself as a feminist based on some of my early experiences that led me into the rabbinate. I was a Jewish person who wanted to be able to do things I was interested in, it didn't matter that I was a women or that women hadn't done it I was incredibly naïve that this really was a field that did not have women as participants or leaders and I had great aunts who were from Germany who were psychologists and social workers my grandmother had gone a couple of years to medical school so initially I thought this is just kind of a normal thing. I got to a point where I wanted to continue my education and I can pursue this area so I think I was pretty naïve when I entered the rabbinate. I believe that Feminism as the opportunity for women to achieve personally and professionally in any field. I do advocate economic reality of feminism that women need to be paid equal money for equal work.

Emily Huebscher: Has your definition changed throughout your experience in the rabbinate?

Karen Fox: I've always been a pragmatist so in terms of feminism it wasn't a theological statement for me it was an opportunity for me to pursue my work as a Jewish person who felt really drawn to the Jewish community For spiritual and personal and professional growth and so fem at the time when I was in school meant equal opportunity and I still think I have understood that and believe it. Equal access. Has it changed? Somewhat, because I also think 30 some years later I see that in some ways women have achieved quite a bit in the Jewish community in one generation or a generation and a half in terms of Jewish leadership. I still don't think except I probably am paid fairly well, I don't think women have the same access to resources that men do in most synagogues in terms of equal pay for equal work. I do think we have influence in terms of educational, religious, political, spiritual leadership. But feminism is not what got me into the rabbinate, the Jewish people and the creativity of Jewish experience is what led me to become a rabbi.

Emily Huebscher: What role did being a woman play in your rabbinate?

Karen Fox: Played a lot of roles. I was the first woman hired by the UAHC when I was ordained in 1973 and even though they said we're not hiring you because you're a women, it's obvious they did, because they had no women on professional staff that were rabbis prior to my work. It made a diff once I was married and pregnant, and I went to

Alexander Schindler and asked for maternity leave, and he said well none of our other rabbis have asked for a maternity leave before. And I said, none have been women before. Then he thought about it a while and a few weeks later he said, here's the paper on your maternity leave but don't share it with anybody. And of course I xeroxed it and sent it to the others, maybe there were 6 of us who were rabbis and women and sent it to them. I think it effected the structure of my career wanted to be able to be a mom as well as a rabbi so when I moved to California initially I worked part time for about 7 years as a... maybe other people wouldn't call it part time but in the rabbinate it was part time I was a middle school teacher and director at \_\_\_\_ Academy, which is a day school, but it was 5 days, but it wasn't full time and wasn't all weekend. I think being a woman had influenced my career when I went back to working full time when my oldest son in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and my younger 4<sup>th</sup> grade, I felt my life experience as a mother had given me much more compassion from the congregants in understanding the balance of home and work and a deeper meaning of home as an important Jewish anchor and work being part of it but not the totality of my life. I think my being a woman influenced that when my moth elderly she had Alzheimer's and I made it a spiritual practice to make sure that I saw her weekly and felt that my responsibilities as a daughter also influenced my experience as a rabbi and congregants knew my mom was sick and now a lot of my work is related... sometimes the process of responding to family issues, elderly parent issues, and the response that's outside of my work response as a full human being as a mother and as a daughter and as a wife all influence me and have an impact on my role as a leader.

Emily Huebscher: Gender affect liturgical choices and sermons

Karen Fox: Sermons for sure at different times in terms of balance in terms of balance, in terms of understanding some of our texts with different eyes and with the reality of what does it means to be a member of a family and a rabbi and to be a model of how to be a Jewish person who is a working mother.

Emily Huebscher: You gave sermons on that subject?

Karen Fox: I have along the way.

Emily Huebscher: Liturgical choices?

Karen Fox: Not really, I work in a large reform synagogue, we all use the same prayer books maybe I adapted wedding ceremonies early on and some ways to include women's voices and certainly in funerals to included women poets or women writers when a woman dies but I follow a pretty traditional liturgical path.

Emily Huebscher: Women's rituals?

Karen Fox: No not really. Here, you decide? I've taken women to the *mikvah* upon divorce. When a mom had a child die I've escorted her to the *mikvah*. I've... this is not a ritual, but I developed a women's business and professional group within the synagogue in the 1980's. Now, we don't really need it, because *au contraire*, there are too many women involved and not enough men. In terms of rituals for many years we had a women's Seder.... now, some of that seems like it was an early response to the rabbinate, for women in the rabbinate in the 70's and in the 80's that we were developing these new things. then comes the reality of ok, my function as a rabbi to be able to engage people in Jewish practice and that means opening different doors but often at different times it means not stressing the fact that I'm a woman rabbi. Every time I open my mouth or walk onto the pulpit, people know it; I don't need to advertise. I need to be a good rabbi I don't need to be a good woman rabbi.

Emily Huebscher: What pressures do you think were unique as a pioneer?

Karen Fox: To succeed, to write well, to be able to balance my work and my family in a healthy way. Pressure to have privacy as an individual and privacy for my husband and kids.

Emily Huebscher: How have those changed?

Karen Fox: My kids grew up. What do you mean, how have those changed. I've been a rabbi 32 years. I'm pretty good at it. And so I have confidence in my capacity to balance the rhythm of a congregational life and my need for health and spiritual practice and free time and reading and continual study and is there is sort of a liberation when my kids went to college, I left a certain freedom in my time again. Although I miss them and miss the balance of life with having children at home because now I have to remind myself not to work all the time.

Emily Huebscher: Were you conscious of a changing rabbinate?

Karen Fox: Yes, I mean we walked... the first time I walked into a CCAR conference, there were 4 rabbis who were women, very hard not to notice that. When I showed up for my first job, which was for the URJ now, for the UAHC, sometimes people ask about my husband, and there was one guy who owned a women's clothing line, and when I walked in in a maternity dress the first time he said something like, ah, the phantom husband appears. I was well aware of being new in this field as I told you when I asked for maternity leave nobody'd considered it. When I was a student at HUC in Los Angeles, there is one tiny women's bathroom and unfortunately there still is. When I started having kids and my cohorts Debbie Prinz and Ellen Weinberg D\_\_\_\_, started having kids we among the first balancing children and work as rabbis and being moms. There were all sorts of expectations or lack of expectations or bad jokes about rabbi's husbands. What they expected him to do, was he going to be the *rebbitzen*, what do we call him? Finally, Roz Gold came up with I call him Lucky cause he's married to me. It's very clear it was a changing rabbinate it was a changing world in that I had friends who were lawyers who were also young lawyers in law firms and were among to first women on partner track or women who were doctors so in the late 70's early 80's there's a whole sense of women's involvement in professional life which was different from the previous generation.

Emily Huebscher: Expectations of rabbinate in general?

Karen Fox: Some of it didn't; there's still an expectation of a rabbi being available to your congregation; I think there is an attempt to be more public about family, but I think most congregants are still not particularly interested in the rabbi's family, they're interested in the rabbi being available to their family; and I think that that's a boundary issue that a rabbi needs to understand psychologically, that when I speak it's important that I don't only speak or at least mostly speak about me. Because I'm hired by the congregation to serve a role in their community life and just like often when we go to a physician we don't ask about their family life. Congregants are often, a particularly in a large congregation, not particularly interested in the rabbi's family life. They may be interested that the husband appears for major congregational events, fundraising events, honorific events, high holidays, but they're not necessarily interested in what the rabbi's personal life is. I don't think that has changed. I think I may be different in LA, New York, Boston, Chicago, whatever, in a large congregation. There is less involvement with the rabbinic family than there would be in a small congregation in a small city. So one of the things I have like in being in a very large congregation, because I have a lot of privacy in a

large congregation in a large city. So for example my kids went to day school all the way from K-12 and then they didn't have to be involved in the temple's religious school, they had their own Jewish educational experience separate from their mom the rabbi.

Emily Huebscher: More superficial elements how women looked and dressed and you wrote about it a little bit in your article. Joy Lovette navy blue suit model and the goddess rabbi opposite, continuum where are you.

Karen Fox: Well I'm not on the goddess category let's be real. When I interviewed for my job with the UAHC my mother got me a navy blue suit, that's why I'm laughing. Because it was the professional look. It wasn't only modeling after the men, it was how women dressed in work. Women in the late 70's, early 80's, for the most part still wore dresses and suits to work and for the Union one of my board member actually pulled me aside and asked why are you wearing suits, because I actually had 3 suits and I had a lot more blouses, why don't you wear dresses. So this was a Park Avenue sisterhood today, and I said you know I actually buy suits because it is less expensive; I can wear a number of different blouses with the same suit and give it a different look. So that was one thing. Here in LA it's a lot more casual. Although, I wear professional business attire, I wear pants most of the times and sweaters or sweater sets, or a pants suit or whatever because it's a congregation where men wear suits and we're expecting to be dressing professionally. I can wear a funky dress, I can wear goddess things but what would have happened is there is a relatively elderly lady who would say to be still, Rabbi Fox, I like that suit but I've seen it before. So I say to her, it's my favorite. So it doesn't matter what you wear, it's always something for somebody to talk about. Because, On one hand Clothes are the access point for other women to get to know the rabbi. It creates a unity between other women who are professionals or not professionals, if they're here for Shabbat. Shabbat I still wear dresses or skirts because I came from a traditional background and I dress differently on Shabbat than I do during the week. But there was a lot of discussion, "what are we going to wear."

Because, people would say the most inappropriate things.

Karen Fox: Have you interviewed Bonnie Steinberg?

Emily Huebscher: Not yet.

Karen Fox: Go ask her.

Yum hum, (laughter)

People would say things about the size of our breasts, about how much we weighed, about whether we wore makeup or we didn't wear makeup, whether women rabbis colored their hair or don't color their hair; its like so get over it, women rabbis are like other women who are professional but are more visible like politicians or perhaps litigators

Emily Huebscher: Challenges you faced in creating your rabbinic image. Were you conscious of being a rabbi when you were shopping, how did that play into it?

Karen Fox: Wanting things to be appropriate on the *hima*, meaning modest. We have a *bima* that is up 6 seats, our temple has two sides, so I want skirts that are long enough so people don't look at my legs. I want to buy blouses that are appropriate, but not revealing. So modesty is a concept that it important to me as a rabbi; it isn't only owned by the orthodox community. But dressing immodestly as a rabbi is distracting to the congregation. And the benefit of a suit for a man or a dress or suit for a woman or slacks is that it can be appropriate professional dress so the attention is not on the rabbi the attention is on the moment and being dressed appropriate, professionally. Who's your thesis advisor?

Emily Huebscher: Gary \_\_\_\_\_

Emily Huebscher: So how do you think that the picture of the woman rabbi has changed

Karen Fox: Lighted up, there are many more of us when I was ordained there were 4 of us so there are many more it's more usual, people aren't shocked, I think the role of women in professional life has opened for rabbi and lots of other professional, so women's concern for family and balance and meaning for work can all be brought together I think that things that I've experienced as a woman as a member of a family helped me understand about the Jewish people a lot better than I did when I started out when I was ordained 30 something years ago.

Emily Huebscher: Assumption made about you

Karen Fox: I don't know those.

Emily Huebscher: As a pioneer woman rabbi did you feel that you were part of the group that shaped future women rabbis.

Karen Fox: I do to some extent, because over the years people have asked about my work experience my balance of family and work, why I've stayed in a large congregation I'm an associate in a large congregation for a number of years, why didn't I leave and go to a smaller congregation and be a senior rabbi and all those kinds of things. So people have asked about it and I've served as a role model for others and their choices. But I think the world and what happens with women and professionals is also a significant influence on other women who are rabbis.

Emily Huebscher: My last section on how women perceive their experience in the rabbinate.

Karen Fox: Greatest success? I think staying in a large congregation for a long time, I've been here 18 years, and having my work grow and develop and long term relationships and influences on the structure of Wilshire Blvd temple on its program and on family.

Emily Huebscher: What are the ways in which being a woman facilitated success?

Karen Fox: I don't know if its about being a woman or I'm a person who says things as they are, and I ask myself, what's the truth, what's the truth here, what's the truth here and that has given me an honesty and an integrity about my work and about the community and what's the truth about the Jewish people, what's the truth about what we're doing as a synagogue, what's the truth about bringing God's presence to our lives. So I think my capacity to ask questions that maybe aren't asked by men or men in this place.

Emily Huebscher: Greatest challenges to you as a woman rabbi?

Karen Fox: Being able to be an available mom and a healthy rabbi and healthy human being. There are so many time demands on a rabbi and I often struggle with putting myself on the priority list for my health and exercise, for my own spiritual practice and study life, to be able to be an ongoing caring member of my own family. First it's The balance and seduction of being able to work all the time. And a congregation that has more and more and more needs that have to be met.

Emily Huebscher: Positive or negative?

Karen Fox: Positive! I'm still here! Which is real. If I start to feel, and I wonder about this because I've been doing this as long as I have. if it's no longer fun or interesting or creative then I'm going to leave before it feels like it's a burden that I don't want to keep doing. I think the rabbinate Takes an enormous physical and spiritual toll on a women or a man, and I'm 59 and thinking when do I retire, because I'm a rabbi but I'm also a marriage and family therapist, I'm interested I think in terms of developing a practice perhaps in rabbinic coaching in my next stage; I don't know when I can afford financially to

do it, and when would I like to do that and have a different work life where I don't work 6 or 7 days a week.

Emily Huebscher: What do you enjoy the most?

Karen Fox: I love to teach, I like to study and keep teaching what I'm studying. I've been involved with the IJS, the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. I have loved studying all the way. I have always had a *chavarut* partner and that has allowed me to do this work this long, so I like studying and teaching. I am also interested in pastoral counseling and do a lot of professional mentoring in my work, I supervise a lot of staff.

Emily Huebscher: What about you made it possible to succeed as a pioneer rabbi.

Karen Fox: I'm driven. I have parents who came with nothing to America and they made a life and I learned that its important to work and to do it well and to take pride in it and pursuing excellence is something I believe in.

Emily Huebscher: Last ? Advice

Karen Fox: Keep your eyes open, take care of yourself physically, always have a study partner and a therapist. Think before you speak. And I think part of it is sort of knowing that I have a relationship with God that sustains me and that gives me a certain kind of strength and the belief in the future of the Jewish people.

Emily Huebscher: Thank you so much

Karen Fox: I'd like a copy when you're done. How many women are you interviewing?

Emily Huebscher: 15-20 , First 10 years, there are 32, not all of them have responded.

Karen Fox: They're probably busy. Good luck. Are you finishing now?

**Interviewer: Emily Huebscher, 5<sup>th</sup> year student HUC**  
**With: Rabbi Joan S. Friedman, 1980**  
**Date: January 28, 2010**

Emily Huebscher: Thank you so much for agreeing to speak with me. Remind you that I am recording this for the American Jewish Archives.

When you first thought about becoming a rabbi.

Joan Friedman: It's a hard question, because I didn't really... it was something that I was interested in and probably would have thought about sooner but women really weren't rabbis so I couldn't say at this point... high school people would tease me and say oh you're going to grow up to be a rabbi. But until Sally was ordained in 72 when I was in college did I think seriously about it.

I guess it would be more accurate my thought never went much further than if I were a guy that it would be something I was interested in.

Emily Huebscher: If you consider yourself a feminist and how you define feminism.

Joan Friedman: Absolutely I consider myself a feminist. To me it means that women should have the opportunity to choose to lead their own lives as they want free of gender expectations.

Emily Huebscher: Role of a women

Joan Friedman: It's sort of inevitable, obvious people saw me as such, I couldn't get away from the fact that sometimes I had to prove myself and probably to some extent my perspective on the world is colored by the fact I'm a woman and not a man but I've never been particularly interested in exploring the different.. or having a unique rabbinate because I'm a woman.

Emily Huebscher: Has your definition changed, throughout your experience in the rabbinate, your definition of feminism?

Joan Friedman: No, I should probably broaden what I said before, feminism means that women should have the opportunity to develop and be who they would like to be free of constraints based on assumptions about sex or gender but it also means that our society and culture should value the presence of women as much as they value the presence of men.

Emily Huebscher: Has that always been your definition?

Joan Friedman: Yeah, I think so.

Emily Huebscher: How do you think gender affect liturgical choices or sermon topics.

Joan Friedman: It affected my lit choices because I was very happy to use inclusive language starting when I was a rabbinic student which was the first I knew of people doing such things. I don't think it really affected my sermon topics but I'm an academic and haven't been a congregational rabbi since 1994? I don't preach very much. Lecture topics, I've never been particularly interested in doing research into issues of women initiates? or sexuality. I just felt that that's what I was doing in my rabbinate I was sort of by definition always in some ways dealing with being a rabbi who was a woman but as an area of intellectual interest in research it never interested me. Even more so I have to say I'm really, not that I'm in the closet, but I was really not interested being known as a lesbian rabbi and had no interest in being part of the anthology that \_\_\_\_\_ and Shirley \_\_\_\_\_ put together. They asked me if I would write a chapter and I refused.

Emily Huebscher: Did you allow them to list your name?

Joan Friedman: They didn't ask me. I don't have a copy of the book. There's something about it that strikes me as so much part of the culture of celebrity. Sort of tell-all culture I'm not interested in putting my personal life out there for people to talk about.

Emily Huebscher: Do you feel differently about being a lesbian rabbi as being a woman rabbi?

Joan Friedman: Not really, I'm also not really interested in writing about myself as a woman rabbi. I'm more interested in being known for my scholarship.

Emily Huebscher: Did you introduce woman's rituals in your congregational life or your academic life?

Joan Friedman: No.

Emily Huebscher: Were you conscious of making any other choices in your rabbinate based on your gender?

Joan Friedman: No.

Emily Huebscher: In general in the rabbinate, were you conscious of a change in the rabbinate?

Joan Friedman: Well, by definition it was a change and I remember lots of discussions in the early years about things changing. I know that there's been a huge change for example in the kinds of programming that goes on at CCAR conventions. I know that in the 1980 that had a lot to do with the presence of women and the presence of men coming into the rabbinate who had gone through school with women; the joke used to be and I don't know how true this is, that CCAR conventions were places where guys came to hang out together and say "How big is yours", how big is your congregation? I think what women have brought to the rabbinate is that is that is not the sole measure of success as a Rabbi. I can't say that's solely the result of women but it's also a cultural changes but that cultural change has also been very much furthered because of feminism in the past 30 years, 40 years. A lot of people in my generation and younger what ""success is, reexamining the relationship between work and personal life and making choices that people conventionally identify as more feminist choices and choices that embody values that are associated with women, personal relations over size. Men who feel more comfortable saying I'd rather be in smaller congregation because I like the intimacy of it a trend to the point that in some years they have trouble rounding up applicants for very large cong On the other hand by the same token, Women have considered it something to celebrate when a woman is hired a rabbi of a large senior cong most of the r in most of the large congregation are still men and women more often than not women have not wanted to interview for those positions. Some women wasn't too and it a positive step when women have been hired in those congregations.

Emily Huebscher: What pressures were unique as a pioneer.

Joan Friedman: Well, there were the silly things such as when I started as a student in NY the health insurance policy did not cover women's health. The only woman's bathroom in the old building on 68<sup>th</sup> street was on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor where the secretaries worked. We were the first group that started with more women than men, my entering class in NY had 8 women 7 men and there were tremendous tensions at first because it was one of those periodic times when they were worried about ordaining too many rabbis so all of the guys were worry that none of them were only going to hire the women; we kept getting asked to

speaking at this congregation or that congregation and picking up a \$25 honorarium. It was still a time when the women coming in tended to have more extensive Judaic backgrounds than many of the men and also feeling that they had to be 10 times as good in order to be accepted, so it didn't help when they split us into upper and lower level Hebrew classes and the upper level had 8 women and 1 man. There were a lot of tensions in the early day. None of it panned out. When I started grad school I took a part time congregation in New York to support myself and shortly after I started I got a call from one of my classmates who was a full time rabbi in the area and she said that her president (she and her president both had thought this was very funny) he had gotten a call from the president of my new part time congregation asking what they were paying their fulltime woman rabbi. And of course that was a full time congregation in Manhattan and mine was a part time in the Bronx. So under any circumstances they were not comparable, so you have a woman rabbi and we have a woman rabbi so find out what they want. It was ridiculous.

When I was a student I went on staff at a regional Hillel retreat, and there were students from all sorts of backgrounds orthodox guys went out of their way to be rude and insulting. And the one who was the most rude and insulting showed up to lead *minchas*, Shabbas afternoon totally drunk. That was ok. There were those things. I got criticism, anonymous criticism about what I was wearing. People felt free to make those kinds of comments. It was a little ridiculous.

Emily Huebscher: Pressures changed?

Joan Friedman: I would say that they are pretty much non-existent in academia. Academia has its own issue but it's unrelated to the rabbinate. I don't feel it as a faculty member I don't feel issues as a college chaplain. I was about to say, I also didn't feel it in my last pulpit which was in a university town. I probably wouldn't have been so badly paid had I been male.

Emily Huebscher: Section on the physical image of the rabbi. Comments about the way that you looked. Joy Levett navy blue suit, goddess.

Joan Friedman: I'm probably the navy blue suit because that's what I'm more comfortable in. One of the things I like about being a college professor is that I can wear jeans every day.

Emily Huebscher: Stories about people's commenting on the way that you looked.

Joan Friedman: I recall when I got the anonymous letter I had a burgundy silk dress, when I saw burgundy, it was the color of gates of repentance deep, deep, deep, dark burgundy. It was short sleeve silk dress, very tailored with a waist band and buttons up and down the front, Sleeves came down almost to the elbow, very conservative dress. I wore it on a 95 degree day to conduct a funeral. Letter saying a short sleeve red dress is not appropriate for conducting a funeral. That was the first and only.

Emily Huebscher: How do you think the image has changed?

Joan Friedman: There are a lot more women and I think that people are a lot more used to women rabbis so there's a lot more flexible about what my colleagues can and can't well think.

Emily Huebscher: Did the pioneer rabbis model professional women or male rabbis.

Joan Friedman: I recall there being a lot of discussion about all of that dress for success because women were going into all kinds a new professions for the first time in the 70s and the 80s. So there was a lot a discussion about how Women should dress to look

professions. law school, business school, medical school. All kinds of things they had never done before. The discussions were very much tied into a larger cultural trend.

Emily Huebscher: What assumption about you as a female rabbi.

Joan Friedman: These days, I couldn't begin to tell you. I really don't know. I work in a college with a small Jewish population with not even very many Jewish faculty so I work and I'm a faculty member who also advises Hillel; most of what I do is academic. I think I'm more...

At the beginning, well you know it not any different from what women faculty members' experience. Students expect female faculty members will always be nice and nurturing and understanding, women professors are not supposed to give you a bad grade, they're not supposed to take you to task for not doing your homework, there's a real double standard there in the consciousness of college students which we're all very aware of and I think that some of that a lot of that carries over to women rabbis too, women rabbis were always supposed to be nice and nurturing and warm. They were automatically assumed to be good with kids which I'm not particularly, nor do I enjoy teaching kids or working with kids. But all of those assumptions are part of larger cultural patterns. People now are aware to some extent that they're not supposed to think like that, they still do.

Emily Huebscher: Do you feel like as the pioneer women rabbis shaped what future female rabbis would look like?

Joan Friedman: That's an interesting question. I really don't know. I don't think I had any consciously of intending to or being expected to shape what would come after me. And I don't think that we were consciously trying to do so in any way. Other than to find for things like Maternity leave, pay equity, things like that would be a benefit to women. I don't think I was trying to mold what future women rabbis would be.

Emily Huebscher: Did you feel any challenges in creating your rabbinic image, spoke, and dressed and acted?

Joan Friedman: It was also tied up with being very young and looking considerable younger than I was, and going in my first year into an assistant position in a huge, and very stuffy congregation which I was unprepared for it and my position was a political football. Yes in that context I was very worried that I might... there were 6000 people, 2400 families, there was a good chance any time I went out, I could run into somebody or somebody could come up to me and say, hi you don't know me but I'm a congregant of yours and I was tremendously nervous that I might be seen in a way that wasn't somehow rabbinic. I'm not sure how much of that was because I was female or because I was young and how much of it was because the place was just so stuffy and pretentious. Because a few years later I went to this solo position in a small cong in a university town and very quickly learned that there were no pretensions and there were no separations bet me and the congregation because we were all in this town together and going into a fitting room in the mall the person next to you was likely to be a cong. Go out to dinner or to a movie and a dozen or so people would be your congregation.

Emily Huebscher: And was that difficult?

Joan Friedman: Not at all, because the community was such that everybody else felt the same way. Several cong were therapists and I knew that a number of other cong were seeing them as therapists but interacting in public or in *shul* as personal friends. You couldn't separate out or compartmentalize your life and in some ways that was very nice. I remember talking to friends who had pulpits in NY or NJ and friends, women and men, not

only women would say I'm not a member of JCC but I go to a health club a half hour away so I don't run into congregants. I didn't have that option. Or friends who would say that I'm not friends with any of my congregants because I don't want that kind of entanglement. But if I weren't friends with my congregants, who would I have been friends with. So it made for an entirely different dynamic and I liked that very much.

Emily Huebscher: My last section about professional realities of the female rabbi. What was your greatest success as a rabbi?

Joan Friedman: Turning that congregation into a really viable, vital exciting place. It had a lot of potential when I came as their first full time rabbi and it grew enormously and continued to grow.

Emily Huebscher: Ways being a woman facilitated success?

Joan Friedman: I don't know. I can't really separate that out from who I am altogether I think I was very unpretentious I was very low key. I think that was definitely a big part of it and I don't know what part of that is because I'm a woman or my personality. At the same time I know that a lot of my success there was because of my academic background with an academic community. I really don't know.

Emily Huebscher: What do you think greatest challenges?

Joan Friedman: Again at this point it's hard to separate out which elements are because I'm a female which elements are because I'm me or I'm me having grown up as female in my family. My biggest regret that I didn't advocate for myself more in terms of financial compensation and I think I was definitely taken advantage of. I think they would have taken advantage of a man too in that situation but probably not as much.

Emily Huebscher: Would you consider more positive or negative?

Joan Friedman: On the whole positive. I didn't really go in intending to be a congregational rabbi at all and it was sort of a fluke and I was happy to leave it.

Emily Huebscher: What caused the fluke?

Joan Friedman: When we were students there was a fair amount of pressure to go into pulpit and I guess I don't know whether it was curiosity or a desire to conform or I just felt a desire to perform or to prove myself but my first year in the enormous congregation was quite unpleasant it was not a good match, not a good situation. The 5 years that I spent in Bloomington were quite enjoyable but wasn't what I wanted to be doing and I only went there because my dissertation work had hit a dead end.

Emily Huebscher: Enjoy the most?

Joan Friedman: Teaching. I'm very happy in what I'm doing now. I use my rabbinic training is useful because in an acc context because I am the only person doing Jewish study courses at a small liberal arts college. I teach everything from biblical Hebrew to the holocaust and I couldn't do that if I only had graduate training in Jewish history and in essence it is useful to me and it helped me get my foot into the door because I teach a 2/3's load and my other position is serving as the campus rabbi and serving with interfaith ministries and if I couldn't do that I couldn't have gotten this job. But I would give it up in a heartbeat. I feel my heart is not into it anymore I would like to be a full time scholar.

Emily Huebscher: Succeed

Joan Friedman: To tell the truth, a certain amount of obliviousness.... So much of what bothered many of my colleges went right over my head and didn't affect me.

Emily Huebscher: Advice.

Joan Friedman: I would say we have more than enough rabbis, what we need are knowledgeable committed Jew sitting in our congregations. Find something else to do.

Emily Huebscher: Thank you

**Interviewer:** Emily Huebscher, 5<sup>th</sup> year student HUC

**With:** Rabbi Elyse D. Frishman, 1981

**Date:** February 2, 2010

Emily Huebscher: Remind you I am recording for the American Jewish Archives. Thesis on the experience of women in the rabbinate. When you first thought about becoming a rabbi.

Elyse D. Frishman: The summer between my junior and senior years of college summer 75, I had never even heard of the concept my uncle was reform rabbi and I had a strong sense of reform Judaism and I had done a number of things in Reform Judaism, I had gone on EIE, I was on urban mitzvah core and I was a counselor at Eisner and that summer I was a unit head. That summer one rabbi Jim Herman said to me, Elise, I think you should think about becoming a rabbi and I just laughed and I said I don't even know what you're talking about. There's no such thing and he said, oh come on there are two counselors here who are in Rabbinical School. I started thinking about it that fall. And with my personality, I made a grid of all the things that I loved to do, all the abilities I had or all the kinds of activities that engaged me and then I made a list of all the possible professions that might have engaged me somehow and I just checked things off and rabbi had all of them.

Emily Huebscher: What kinds of things on the list?

Elyse D. Frishman: I never kept the list, so I'm going to pretend. Learning teaching being creative thinking about legal issues, or taking puzzles apart, creating writing programs teaching kid, teaching adults, being in a really innovating setting, counseling, originally pre-med and then became a phys major and really wanted to become a psychologist all the things were what I realized that a rabbi could do. So that led to my really seriously considering it.

Emily Huebscher: Did you talk to Eisner's rabbinical students?

Elyse D. Frishman: I didn't. I didn't even know what to ask them; and I was too blown away by it and I didn't picture myself as a rabbi because how do you as a female in 1975, what do you picture yourself as. The very concept was beyond me, so, it was only when I went back to school, I went to a women's college, I was living in a house with 10-15 other women, and a number of them were Jewish and I kind of started sharing the idea with them and they were really pumped about it, like this is so cool, and it's feminist, you could do whatever you want and I realized I really didn't have to picture anything, I could just do this, I would make it be what I wanted it to be. I also had to get away from the image that the rabbi being this good perfect human being, because I'm the kind of rabbi who no kids could pull things over on me cause I've done it; so, it took me time to see myself in that role but I'd been doing so much leadership stuff in the Jewish community that wasn't the issue, the issue was the word rabbi, But on the other hand my uncle was a very cool rabbi. He did a lot of work with high school kids and they love him and he love them. I could really see, he's a brilliant guy and he's a terrific art collector, and very savvy on so many levels that I could see that being a rabbi could be really cool.

Emily Huebscher: A feminist and how do you define feminism?

Elyse D. Frishman: I don't know the answer to that anymore at all. First of all I can't give you an intellectual answer because I haven't done any recent reading. So I can't give you that kind of an answer. If you emphasize the rights of women over other people's rights

or whether you emphasize human rights and equal access, I guess for sure that's what I am. I have difficulty answering that questions, I think people looking at me really think that I am but I don't know that... Emily, how are you defining the term.

Emily Huebscher: My question is how you define it and how that has changed throughout your rabbinate, so more than if you identify as a feminist. It is interesting to me that you feel people presume that you're a feminist.

Elyse D. Frishman: I guess that a better way to answer that is that I don't see myself as any kind of an -ist. I tend to be... if anything I'm probably... I'm more of an individualist. I tend not to follow rules if there are rules. I tend to break them if I want to break them. I tend to create systems that haven't existed before. So, if I think that feminism enables. Without hesitation feminism enabled me to do what I am doing today and I indebted to the women who really pushed for equal access and redefined gender roles being determined by the individual and not by society. I feel keenly about all of that. The term has evolved over time and I have not thought over time about what that means. When my husband and I first got married, feminist ideals shaping our relationship and our marriage. The obviousness of keeping my name; the obviousness of there never being pressure on me to stay home so he could do what he wanted to do; there never being an expectation that one of us would be an x type of a parent vs. the other, so feminism absolutely influenced each of us in this regard. and I would hold those same values for anyone else. So if that's what a feminist is, that's what I am.

Emily Huebscher: What role do you see that being a woman played in your rabbinate?

Elyse D. Frishman: External perspective, meaning people seeing me, it gave me permission to really work outside the box because people had no expectation of what I was going to be. But of course that hurt me, as it would hurt any woman, but at the same time it opened a lot of doors. From my own perspective, I think I had no expectations so I just did what I thought would be effective and I think that being a woman also... ego expression is very, very different from most men I think and because I was always really ambitious, meaning I felt this keen desire to be successful in an adventurous sense that I would be innovative and it would be well received but I think that early on because I was female and people were kind of startled by me, it gave me the chance to draw people's attention to ideas I had.

I think that it drew people to me in ways that were for me good and bad, for one thing I think that people had assumption about how a women would be, you know warm, fuzzy, these kinds of things, I'm not really warm and fuzzy. In a way, it actually made a closer relationship quicker than if I had been a male and not wanted to be fuzzy. Because people just assumed that I would be and they gathered to me. I also think that a lot of times people say to me oh, you do this because this is a woman, and I think no, you don't know my husband, he would do the same thing. There are qualities that people attribute to being a woman but I don't think that's accurate.

Emily Huebscher: How did gender affect your liturgical choices and sermon topics?

Elyse D. Frishman: I don't know how it affected my sermon topics at all except that my style was never to preach but to teach and so always as I do to this day, I do a *d'var* and it's related to whatever I'm teaching related to our lives I don't think that different from what men do either, I may or may not be more inclined I don't think I am to talk about topics that

might be of interest to women than to men but I don't think there was really an influence. I can't distinguish my own personality from gender in this regard.

Liturgically I think I was extremely sensitive to liturgy that felt exclusive whether in Hebrew or in English. I have a strong memory in mid-80's I have had two congregations, in my first congregation I was there for 14 year, and probably 5-6 years in, we began... I had a meeting with ritual committee to talk about what was then called the *Avot*, and I remember just vehement reaction from men on the ritual committee, negative. And I said, look guys, we're going to try this for 6 months, I explained the history and all this other stuff and the notion of inclusivity and why things are different and I said it's gonna take time but that's ok, but this is an ethical issue, and therefore it's not just a question of intellectual curiosity this is really ethical and we all gotta work on it. So I said we're going to give it 6 months and of course in 6 months there was just no issue whatsoever of including the *imahot*, everyone just became used to it, and understood it and of course the response to including it was so important. Similarly I think with my work with *b'nai mitzvah* students and it's funny I've seen a resurgence of this in the last 4 or 5 years, in those days back in the 80's and early 90's people were very sensitive to how you referred to humanity instead of saying mankind, and it was just an automatic thing I would just teach my students you don't say mankind you just say humanity 'cause think about it, I am not a man, we've got to be inclusive here, etcetera, and then there was just a period of probably 10-12 years people were everybody was using that language, now I'm finding we're right back to where we were, kids and adults alike use what I would consider to be gender exclusive language and I'm offended by it and I appreciate that most people see it as inclusive and blah, blah, blah, but language matters a lot to me for obvious reasons. So moving a head in the liturgy I feel very sensitive not only to particular word choices in think for example in *Mishkan T'filah* when we evaluated the use of God-references such as *avinu* or *malcanu* \_\_\_\_\_ terms in context in *hashkivanu* we substituted *malcanu* with *shamranu* because we thought *shamranu* was a better word to describe what the *hashkivanu* was about and we if fact, wanted to on some level make a statement that our understanding of God has broadened and we don't want to be limited to terms that don't give us a sense of what the prayer's about but I don't have a problem using masculine references to God as I wouldn't have a problem using feminine references to God. I think that God has male and female attributes and I think it's good to reference both.

Emily Huebscher: Did you introduce any Women's rituals into your rabbinate?

Elyse D. Frishman: I don't so much but there also aren't male rituals, I guess in terms of life cycles sure, baby namings and *b'rit milah*, bar and bat mitzvah. Rosh Chodesh for example it's not something that's tapped me very strongly. In my first congregation we did a lot of Rosh Chodesh stuff and while it was fun I didn't feel particularly drawn to it and it didn't really catch on maybe because I wasn't drawn to it, so I really haven't done things like that. But I'm also, you know I said to you at the outset, I'm not.... I'm more of an individualist I don't belong to women's groups but I don't belong to groups.

Emily Huebscher: We're you conscious of making choices in your rabbinate based on your gender?

Elyse D. Frishman: I was conscious of not getting jobs because of my gender. But when you say making choices... I never felt that I couldn't do what I wanted to do. I felt strong support to not only have children but to have maternity leave and I felt supported by my congregation in fact, my first congregation was extraordinary in their loving support of

me as a bore my children and I never felt conflict between the two and I never felt I wanted to work part time. Again, I've always been... I've been pretty ambitious in terms of what I wanted to do and my vision of what I could offer. When I was first ordained, I needed to stay in the NY area and there were 3 positions open and I would not have been barred from any of them for gender reasons, so that was pretty cool. But once I decided after 14 years in my congregation and I wanted to move to another congregation, the gender barrier was huge, huge and it was devastating really watching colleagues of my classmate who were male and being sought for different kinds of things and I knew that being female was not allowing that to happen. At the same time, I just kind of understood that to be what it was and there was nothing I could do about it. So when this position that I'm in now, came along, I took it and when I think back to my early years here it was a mismatch like you wouldn't believe but I'm not one to accept failure so I just said, I'm making this work and I looked at it as I can take this place that is so classically reform and I can just turn it around. And it's a phenomenal congregation now, it's really a special place to be.

Emily Huebscher: I was there for a bar mitzvah once.

Elyse D. Frishman: You were, for whom?

Emily Huebscher: Matt Kagan.

Elyse D. Frishman: You're kidding. How do you know the Kagans?

Emily Huebscher: I dated a cousin of his.

Elyse D. Frishman: Who's his cousin.

Emily Huebscher: Nate Avorn.

Elyse D. Frishman: I love his family Matt's mother was my camper at Eisner.

Emily Huebscher: It's a wonderful family.

Elyse D. Frishman: Matt's at American University.

Emily Huebscher: It's a wonderful congregation

Elyse D. Frishman: It is a wonderful congregation. In terms of having me make choices, I think the only thing is that I do feel more than a man would feel, I feel huge amounts of guilt about not having more time with my children on the other hand I'm driven to work so I'm making a choice.

Emily Huebscher: What pressures do you think were unique as a pioneer.

Elyse D. Frishman: Oh please, radical discrimination. Just disgusting encounters with people. Not people in the congregation, by and large people in the congregation were always very supportive, really terrific but first every woman rabbi has stories. So one of mine is... In my first congregation, the building was like a house, so when there was a *bar mitzvah*, the *bar mitzvah* was actually held in a reception hall like a catering hall kind of thing which made it even harder to make it feel spiritually effective because here I was a female rabbi and in this catering hall you know what's authentic about any of this so I remember once I called someone up to the *bima* to hold the Torah during the bar mitzvah and as he turns he sits down and I'm handing him the Torah he looks at me and says I'd much rather hold you on my lap. I mean that kind of ridiculous encounter wasn't uncommon. I was in an area in NY that is heavily orthodox and Chasidic so in general the culture of the area was really bewildered by me and one of my greatest friendship emerged because I went to a town meeting where one of my congregants was officiating and during the meeting I raised my hand and she called on me as Rabbi Frishman and after the meeting a Chasidic man came over to me and said to me, did I hear right, did she call you a Rabbi and I said yes. And we began having a dialogue and a phenomenal study relationships for several years so

sometimes there are openings because of that that happen otherwise and similarly I developed a wonderful relationship with Judaic book store owner who opened his store and also an orthodox man from very traditional community and we became fast friend in part because he was a maverick and he was a \_\_\_\_\_ and I wanted to learn from him and I have had these opportunities that not everyone else might have had. I think when I came to this congregation and I've been here 14 years there was a lot of discrimination and there was actually a couple in the congregation who were *machers* who did everything in their power first to discourage me from taking the job and then to sabotaging me during my first 5 or 6 years here and I think every woman rabbi has a story where somebody says, I didn't vote for you when you came in but now I realize how terrible it would have been if you weren't my rabbi, and you are my rabbi and stuff like that. I think that for me the discrimination also sometimes comes because I'm not warm and fuzzy and people think a woman should be and I'm very driven, very clear, very direct, I'm an INTJ, that's the antithesis of what women are expected to be,

Emily Huebscher: It's almost the opposite of me, we're both N's, ENFP...

Elyse D. Frishman: There you go... and so it's actually something I've to work with... I've had some coaching to help me manage people.. for years I was clueless about how people would responded to me because I just didn't get it because this is who I am, I now understand it and I know how to reframe things or say things differently or whatever it is because people really don't expect this of a female.

Emily Huebscher: Were you conscience of a changing rabbinate by virtue of your presence in it?

Elyse D. Frishman: Definitely, no question that women, not me per se, but women have absolutely affected the rabbinate, we have shifted, you didn't ask me about me on my congregation but it's the same questions, it can be generalized, although my style of leadership is very strong nonetheless it is based in partnership and in relational leadership as opposed to hierarchical. One of the reasons I think I have excellent leadership I really worked to cultivate people who are innovative healthy, balanced emotionally stable really are committed to the vision of the Temple and are not driven by their own egos and I think that that's a perspective that women bring to the rabbinate and that's something that we've really brought into it and I think that we've influenced men to think this way and it's so healthy. And you know it's interesting I'm just finishing a contract negotiation and it's a brief one, just a one year renewal because it's not a good time to be negotiating anything, so years ago I would really have felt underpaid and I really do think there was a lot of discrimination in salaries and things like that, but this time around there was no question that they wanted to be absolutely certain that they were paying me properly. It was the simplest negotiation I've ever had and I think it's a result of building a trusting relationship where you empower people. I actually learned this from a male rabbi, Peter Rubenstein, I was an intern for him, he's now at Central Synagogue in New York, when I was a student he taught me you will make yourself indispensable by making yourself dispensable. The more you empower others and teach them everything you know, the better a rabbi you'll be because it will force you to learn more and to become more. I absolutely live by that creed. I think that Women are more inclined to do that than men. Because we've been raised to think in more compromising and negotiating kinds of patterns and not to feel such profound ownership of things. Our egos function differently.

Emily Huebscher: Can you identify the role women had in making the greater changes in the rabbinate?

Elyse D. Frishman: I tell you what's hard about this. I think that there's a Strong parallel of women entering the rabbinate and the impact of Nifty on the rabbinate. Are you at all a Niftyite?

Emily Huebscher: Um hum. I worked at Eisner, at OSRUI, and I went to Kutz

Elyse D. Frishman: Excellent, so you know. A style of teaching, listening, of building community that we learn from camp. I used to want every rabbinic student to have to spend at least a summer at camp. I thought it was so critical to the understanding how we shape congregations so I think that's had a huge impact in addition it is that more relational style for example in worship I think women more inclined early on to come off the *bima*, no, that's so interesting, actually it's not true, it's not really true, there are plenty of women who love being on that *bima* and wearing a robe and doing all that stuff. I don't know Emily, I can't generalize about that. I can tell you about me and I think it is because I am a woman that I don't want to be on the *bima*. I want to lead I'm a very strong leader but not be in their face. I want you to feel like you're being engaged and that you have as much ownership of this as I do, so while my leadership is in letting you be in charge in a sense, with my clear vision behind it. Whatever, I don't know. That sounds arrogant. I don't stand on the *bima*, I don't wear a robe, I have a wireless mike. I don't preach per se I teach. I'll interrupt the service to draw attention to something that I think needs attention, I'm very conscious of... maybe the spiritually stuff is because I'm female I have a very strong sense of God's presence in the space around us and I think that women may feel that more intuitively than men. On the other hand, there's always this fear that women in leadership are going to drive the men away. Women never say that. That's not my experience at all. I have a balance of men in women in leadership, as presidents, in every aspect of congregational life. We may have one of the most vibrant men's club in the entire country; we have an incredible group of men in our men's club, our sisterhood is strong. So, I think that relational leadership drives leadership and brings more people into it because they're not coming for ego satisfaction they're coming to do something for others.

Emily Huebscher: Are you conscious about keeping a balance between men and women in the leadership?

Elyse D. Frishman: Yes and no. I'm aware of it, but it doesn't drive a decision. It only drives the decision in ... my men and women who are in leadership are definitely different from each other so sometimes I think it's necessary to have a more male or female perspective or make sure it's balanced on certain committees so then I might be conscious of it but in general no, but we have the same issue when we talk about who's on the staff that we have, when we're in staff transition and looking for a new person I'll sometime here someone say well we better not have another women because then we'll be all women and I'll say, shut up, not only is that unethical, that's not what you need. But people do feel like that sometimes.

Here's a lovely one. Someone came in to me actually for counseling once and was being very passive aggressive and said oh there's a rumor going on around you and I said really, what is it and he said oh I can't tell you now. At the time we had a female cantor and our educator was female, so finally he said well the rumor is that you're a dike, so I laughed, and I said that's very funny, why would someone say that and you know even so, why would it matter. And he said well you know even if you're married, you still could be a lesbian. What is this

all about? Well it turns out that the rabbi of the neighboring congregation had just come out about being gay. So there was this competitive thing going on, whatever, it was sick. But it's a good illustration too of how women more exposed to types of gossip, types of gossip, not gossip, but types of gossip, more than men might be.

Emily Huebscher: Which types?

Elyse D. Frishman: I think there's much more attention paid to what you wear.

Someone once made a comment about they were distracted by my legs, I said don't look.

They said you should wear a robe, I said no. I've had a number of comments about clothing over the years, and about what I should wear and not wear. Men would never have those conversations. I had it in rabbinic school, there was a professor at rabbinic school who decreed that women should be wearing black shoes when we're on the *bima* and was adamant about it and once called me when I was maybe 3 or 4 years into the rabbinate he call me to say Elyse, there's this young woman rabbi out in the field and she's having some difficulties in her congregations and I think it's because she's not wearing lip stick would you call her and tell he I mean that's pretty outrageous. But that was a long time ago. I think there's always gossip about rabbis. But it may be pointed in certain ways because women are expected to be or do certain things so there maybe is a little bit more judgment in that so I think sexual stuff, fashion stuff, very surface kinds of things.

Emily Huebscher: Image of the rabbi and how the perceptions are, how women navigated those at the beginning. In reference to an article that Joy Levett wrote, Navy Blue suit or goddess, if that's a continuum, can you place yourself on it.

Elyse D. Frishman: I can place myself on it but there's a caveat, which has to do with the home you grew up in and how your mother dressed. So my mother was very tailored, she was beautiful and she always dressed exquisitely. In my early years in the rabbinate, I did everything I could to hide my figure, I basically wore potato sack dresses because didn't want to draw attention to myself. As I became more confident about who I was and what I was capable of doing, that changed and I dressed in a very tailored way but I have never worn a suit to work. In fact, in my first year in this congregation which again as I indicated was a classical reform congregation there was a transitional committee that would meet with me periodically in the beginning, and one of the women, a very classically dressed woman, said to me in this group, said rabbi you really should be wearing your black suit here every day, and I looked at her and the group and said look at the chair you have me sitting in, you have me sitting in this large black chair, behind this big desk, I don't have room in this office to sit in a different way and now you want me to put on a black suit and you think people are going to feel comfortable with this woman rabbi. Gratefully three other people in the group immediately said we don't want you to dress like that, you know you're fine. But there was definitely a transition of what people expected but again is it because I was female or the beloved rabbi of 35 year who was gone and now I'm not wearing that suit. I would wear a blazer and slacks. it wasn't a suit the gender issue from the transitional issue from the previous rabbi. The rabbi during my high school years was Chaim Stern of \_\_\_\_ Shalom, he wore a turtle neck people talked about what he wore, my parents did, I can't believe it he's not wearing a jacket and tie, people talked about that, he broke the mold.

Emily Huebscher: What challenges did you face in creating your rabbinic image?

Elyse D. Frishman: I've never thought about creating my rabbinic image. I never made a decision to further my rabbinic image because I can't possibly look like... when someone pictures a rabbi... when they're picturing a Chassid, second they're going to go a

male wearing a suit or something and then maybe they'll come around to me. When I was in the rabbinate 8 years of so and one of my a little girl in the congregation came to services with a Barbie doll and the Barbie doll had a *tallis* and two young children 8 and 4, their mother said they were looking at a web site at a picture of Nancy and Ronald Regan with their hands over their hearts looking at a flag, oh, that's the rabbi (Nancy Regan) and that's the cantor (Ronald Regan). At least I wasn't picked as Ronald Regan. I don't even think about my rabbinic image.

Emily Huebscher: Great stories about people commenting on the way that you looked.

Elyse D. Frishman: Not that I haven't already shared. People feel a little awkward commenting on how I look and when they want to say something they're just a little awkward about it, but I don't know if it's because I'm female or I'm a rabbi; that social boundary. I'm definitely ambivalent, I'm definitely conscious that we can afford to have a pool in our back yard and I would never go to a public pool in a bathing suit. I don't want anyone talking about me. But I don't care what I wear to the supermarket, it's more the bathing suit thing. I kind of discern who my really good friends are by what bathing suit I'll wear with them. Men don't think about that at all. If I'm going to a black tie affair with congregants I think about it but it doesn't effect my decision I wear what I want to wear, but I also think I'm blessed with good genes, so I look good in things and I'm confident enough, I grew up with a mother always dressed very well so it's my nature to do that and not feel shy about what I'm wearing. I had a situation a colleagues daughter wedding; a male looked right down my dress and said oh you dress up nice that was pretty crude.

Emily Huebscher: Change

Elyse D. Frishman: Good news and bad news. The good news is that I think there's a huge level of acceptance by and large, there's always going to be some stuff... women have to work much, much harder and really excel way beyond where men do to have to get partially where men are and I think that continues to this day. It could be my generation, for sure, it's my generation, I don't know about the generation about women 10 or 20 years younger than me how easy it is for them to move into new positions. I know that in the graduating classes over the last couple of years where jobs have been very tight, men are more apt to get positions than women, so there's still discrimination in that regard, you just have to be really great to get somewhere which is also maybe why when I was first ordained and there were only those 3 positions there really wasn't gender discrimination because in fact, the candidates were stellar man and female, they were just above and beyond. I will say that another thing that I've observed that's actually troubles me a lot as more and more women have been ordained over the last 15 years they've chosen not to work full time, or not work at all, I think that's really damaged the sense of a women's work ethic in the rabbinate. I think a woman like me, I am the anomaly than the norm and that men when they hire them are not going to quit or take a year off after they get pregnant. When I was involved people may have been worried about it but they saw that women in my generation didn't leave the rabbinate. I think what women are choosing to do is different now and the reason that I have resentment towards it is because I know that our educations are paid for in good measure by congregations. So when we come out of school and we don't work we've actually abused the money that the congregations put in. I feel it is disingenuous.

Emily Huebscher: Assumptions other than warm and fuzzy

Elyse D. Frishman: I don't know. I don't know. I'm really stumped by that question.

Emily Huebscher: Was the image that you chose in your rabbinate, your mother, other people; other professional women or by rabbinical men that you knew?

Elyse D. Frishman: I don't think it was modeled by anyone. I think it was influenced by my husband because we had a strong working relationship. I learned so much from him I don't think I modeled it after anyone and I didn't know professional women although I went to Mt. Holyoke but all of the women I knew in college went on to do really amazing stuff, my closest friends all did really unusually worked for Doctor's without borders, things writing plays or creating comic scripts; developing the logo for apple. They weren't common things.

Emily Huebscher: As a pioneer did you shape the image? Image, dress speech and actions, not the content of the rabbinate, the superficial things.

Elyse D. Frishman: There's no question that we opened the door; I don't think the.... What is image. definitely we opened the door to a different form of presentation. Interestingly, there's good and there's bad in that, the concept of the uniform is that is that it does command a certain level of respect. I think a woman's uniform isn't defined like a man's. A man's uniform is like a suit and tie or a jacket and tie if a woman tried to dress like that it looked masculine. But that doesn't mean that a woman doesn't have a uniform of a sort, and I do think that when women dress badly it damages their leadership. How's that for a judgmental statement. When women just dress slovenly, when a man dresses slovenly, It doesn't do women justice. We have a.. It's not the same as a man would wear.

Emily Huebscher: Professional realities of the female rabbi. Greatest success?

Elyse D. Frishman: My greatest success is getting people to move themselves to a place they never thought they'd arrive at that is transformational. So, the illustrations of that is the prayer book, getting that to happen, and my congregation what we do and how we've gotten to where we are and what we continue to work on and I think that that's something I'm good at doing.

Emily Huebscher: Being a woman facilitated success.

Elyse D. Frishman: Relational process and combined with having a sense of vision, just to be relational you could process yourself to death so you have to have a sense of direction and trust that if your direction is keen that the process will get you there and will create buy-in and \_\_\_\_\_ along the way as opposed to imposing a vision on a community. And I guess I always felt that the proof is that the vision should outlive me. I should at some point be able to drop out of the process and it should continue without me. And that's what I work at doing. So with the *Mishkan Tiflah*, it Not to be involved with the make sure in any significant way, it shouldn't need me let someone else have fun and I do that with work in the congregation with different initiatives that we have, get it started work on the leadership development, make sure the vision is being implemented and I'm off to something else, let people work on it and enjoy it.

Emily Huebscher: Challenges

Elyse D. Frishman: Tug between parenting and work, discrimination, wondering always in the back of my head, if I were male what work would I be doing, where would I be, but I ask that not with regret but a with sense of awareness.

Emily Huebscher: Positive or negative

Elyse D. Frishman: Positive.

Emily Huebscher: What aspect of the rabbinate do you enjoy the most?

Elyse D. Frishman: Visioning, teaching and counseling and learning and writing. I don't think, the only thing I hate is financial stuff I just don't do it, fundraising I don't like doing it, I'm good at it but I don't enjoy doing it, and remember I'm an introvert, I really... you'll notice the things that I chose that I didn't say going to receptions, *oneg* Shabbat; I didn't say any of those things

Emily Huebscher: What made you able to succeed as a pioneer woman rabbi?

Elyse D. Frishman: ...my personality, my husband, and my desire to not see anything as a failure but as a challenge and I don't blame others. That was really important, early on in particular, you could always say that this didn't work because they discriminated against me, that that's not part of my vocabulary if there's a problem, it's my problem and I've got to work it out.

Emily Huebscher: Advice

Elyse D. Frishman: Find your passion; listen; take your day off and take your vacation time; empower others and keep learning and growing. Watch your ego; get good therapy; never be afraid to ask questions; ask them again. Find great friends outside the congregation. Love your family.

Emily Huebscher: That's very good advice.

Elyse D. Frishman: Thanks, I'm trying to live it.

Emily Huebscher: Thank you so much.

**Interviewer: Emily Huebscher, 5<sup>th</sup> year student HUC**

**With: Rabbi Laura J. Geller, 1976**

**Date: February 1, 2010**

Emily Huebscher: Hi, Rabbi Geller. Hi, how are you?

Laura Geller: Good thanks.

Emily Huebscher: Thanks so much for agreeing to speak with me.

Laura Geller: You're welcome.

Emily Huebscher: I just wanted to remind you this is being recorded for the American Jewish Archives.

Laura Geller: Ok, so tell me again what we are talking about.

Emily Huebscher: Your experience as a woman in the rabbinate.

Laura Geller: OK and tell me why. Just give me the back story before we go on the record.

Emily Huebscher: I am writing my thesis on the first decade of women in the rabbinate. Their experiences as women dealing with issues of feminism and femininity on the bima, also the images that you established for women in the rabbinate. Sort of physical presence, demeanor, how women shaped that in the rabbinate. And the overall experiences of women

Laura Geller: OK, and Who else are you interviewing and what have you been reading. Just so I know.

Emily Huebscher: Sure, I'm interviewing 15 of the first I think there were 32 women in the first ten years.

Laura Geller: The reform movement.

Emily Huebscher: Yes, in the reform movement. I had to limit my scope somewhat. I have read the information in the archives on women in the rabbinate and a number books on the general subject of how women changes the world in the 60's and 70's, and female clergy members as well.

Laura Geller: OK, Good

Emily Huebscher: Anything else?

Laura Geller: No that sounds good.

So I want to start with asking about when you first thought about becoming a rabbi Actually I first thought about becoming when I was in either my junior or beginning of my senior year of college, I was not involved with Hillel but was selected by the chaplains offices to be part of the search team to find a new Hillel rabbi this was at Brown in 1970 probably and so I went on these interviews both to NY and to Cincinnati and I think it was at that moment I began to imagine that this could be really an interesting job. So that was kind of the beginning. My own personal Jewish commitment began to really unfold during college again not through Hillel but through kind of the political work of the 60's, so it really was during college that I became serious about thinking about what it meant being Jewish and then the decision to apply to rabbinical school was really more about learning how to be Jewish than it was about being clear that I wanted to be a rabbi. I dropped out of college, I lived on a kibbutz for a period of time, I had been studying Christian ethics, so all those things together encouraged me I think to apply. It was 1970, you know a good time for a smart women who wouldn't know enough not to apply to rabbinical school.

Emily Huebscher: Interesting. Do you consider yourself a feminist and how do you define feminism?

Laura Geller: I define feminism as including.. as being inclusive of... as including... seeing women a full human beings and including women in the creation of culture-meaning traditions, etc. I think men can be feminists too. But a feminist world view is a world view that includes people who have been marginalized.

Emily Huebscher: Has that definition changed throughout your experience in the rabbinate?

Laura Geller: It hasn't changed actually but I sometimes get sad that younger women don't seem to consider themselves as feminists because it's unthinkable to me that they're not. And men too, then again men can be feminists just as women can.

Emily Huebscher: What role do you see that being a woman played in your rabbinate?

Laura Geller: You know it's hard to say since I'm a woman and I only know my own rabbinate from the internal experience of it. I can't imagine what it would have been like had I been a man. But I was ordained in 1976, and clearly that was a time when there were so few women rabbis that we were sort of oddities. For the first, you know, a million speeches I was asked to give were about the role of women in Judaism. Right? I mean, clearly people came to see what the woman rabbi looked like. I was the first woman rabbi to serve on the west coast. I was the first woman rabbi to be a Hillel director. I was the first woman rabbi to be selected to lead a major metropolitan congregation. So all of those firsts, in some ways, I'm sure, had an impact on my rabbinate. I've written about this a lot so it might be worth taking a look at some of these essays particularly one in Suzanne Heschell's book called, I think it's called On Being A Jewish Feminist, where I specifically write about what it means to be a woman rabbi. And that was pretty early on, so it might be interesting to take a look at. I do believe that women rabbis have been part of changing the face of Jewish life particularly in America but probably all over the world. Some was intentionally and some was simply because of the projections that people make on women that are different from the projections people make on men.

Emily Huebscher: What are those projections?

Laura Geller: Well, again, I write about this in that essay, but although this is not "correct", many people project their image of the rabbi onto God. And a lot of people still have the six-year-old's image of God as an old man with a deep voice living in a chair in the sky. If your rabbi is an old man with a deep voice, you know, well spoken, you make that projection and don't even notice that you are doing it. And if your rabbi is a woman, you can't do that. And so the projection stops and you have to stop and think, whoo, well, what is this God to which I am praying. So I think a lot of the changes in theology have kind of come about because women rabbis intentionally or inadvertently challenged these kind of comfortable notions of this patriarchal image of God, and so once that happens you start asking, well, what is God and then who is the God I want to speak toward and then how do I speak toward that God. And that raises all kinds of issues about prayer-language, so all the issue of inclusive language, feminine images, it's all happening at the same time. The first really serious feminist prayer book I think happened probably in the late 70's. At Brown University a group of women, Maggie Winnik was one of them, when she was an undergraduate, wrote this feminist prayer book, the work that the Reconstructionist Movement was doing, all that kind of stuff was happening around that same time. No surprise, partly it was because of feminism in general but part of it had to do with now you had women being religious leaders, again, not just in our tradition, but in other traditions as well. I remember the first Episcopal women was irregularly ordained in

1972, Sally Priesand was ordained in 1972, Ezrat Nashim in New York is challenging the rabbinical assembly to count Jewish women in the *minyan* around that same time. If the issue is you're going to count women in *minyan* then the next issue is once they're counted then how do they pray? What do they wear? What's this experience of prayer about? Is it the same for men and for women? So all these kinds of questions are beginning to be asked at the same time and I think a lot of it is kicked off by, although not only, by the ordination of women. Then there is the whole issue of hierarchies. As Carol Gilligan taught, success for men seems to have something to do with climbing to the top of a ladder and being on top; success for women seems to have something more to do with being at the center of a hub, the center of a wheel. She argues that it has to do with separation from "mom", stuff like that, whatever, but I think one of the things that has happened partly because of the politics of the 60's and 70's, but again partly because of, maybe the different experiences of women, institutions changed to be more collaborative and less hierarchical. So if you look at the institutions that are led by women, how they're different from the institutions that were led by men and how now that has changed the way institutions are led by men and by women. The important thing about feminism is that it's not just about women, it's about transforming a culture and as the culture is changed it begins to affect men as well as women. You know, now we have men who are married to women who are affected by all this kind of stuff and so these men are leaders the way these women were leaders in a kind of feminist, non-hierarchical way.

Emily Huebscher: How did your gender affect your liturgical choices and sermons?

Laura Geller: How did it? You know, just what I said, it couldn't not, it affects everything I do, I experience the world, from my experience, my particular experience as a Jewish woman, and it affects that way I pray, it affects the way I think, it affects the way I see who's inside and who's outside, it affects the language that I'm comfortable with, you know at the same time I hope I am wise about the communities with whom I work and you know you can't shove change down people's throats, you have to develop partners and change is a slow process.

Emily Huebscher: Did you orchestrate any changes of liturgy based on gender issues?

Laura Geller: Um, Yes, In Hillel it was pretty easy to do because there are going to be changes every four years, I mean every year it's changing, right? I was a Hillel rabbi for the first 14 years of my career and in that setting it is quite easy to be innovative. During that time I organized a conference with a colleague called Illuminating the Unwritten Scroll: Women's Spirituality and Jewish Tradition, 1982. It was a national conference, the first conference that dealt directly with issues of women's spirituality. It was very cutting-edge. And I was ordained in 1976 so that was shortly after my ordination. I think that conference had a really significant impact on all these kinds of issues. This was the first time in a systematic way people were talking about ritual and prayer and you know women's spirituality and art and culture and stuff. Speakers included everybody from Barbara Myerhoff, a wonderful anthropologist lady, an anthropologist with USC, to Larry Hoffman, Danny Landit, you know all over the place, people, women and men, reform, conservative, orthodox; reflecting on Paul Adler, all kinds really... you know the beginning for a lot of people thinking about not only legal issues but about spiritual issues. And that affected liturgy everywhere. When I came to Emanuel, it was a little harder, because Emanuel is an old congregation. It was here before I came and it will be here after I'm gone and change is a little more difficult, plus you can't just buy new books, They're expensive.

And in some ways as a reform congregation we are both blessed but also stuck by the liturgical rules of the movement if you want to be part of the movement. Now we use the Mishkan Tifilah, when I got there we were using the blue Gates of Prayer. We quickly got rid of that and started using the grey book because it was gender neutral. But it's very \_\_\_\_\_ book, it doesn't work very well for prayer. We created an alternative service which is one of our signature services, a Shabbat morning prayer book call \_\_\_\_\_ Emanuel \_\_\_\_\_. We created our prayer book that is a seriously feminist prayer book in the sense that it includes different images of God, it is very thoughtful, it doesn't use the word feminist but it is clearly an inclusive prayer book. That service has been the kind of engine that shaped liturgical change in the congregation because it's an ongoing community that meets every Shabbat and people pray together regularly and are willing to take certain risks there, and we kind of practice innovation there and then slowly bring it into the main sanctuary. And as a result the main sanctuary service has changed as well. I actually wrote about that, you may want to take a look at that in the CCAR journal not so long ago about congregational change.

Emily Huebscher: OK, I read that when you began your rabbinate you were interested in introducing women's rituals, can you talk about that a little bit?

Laura Geller: Yes, I think that from the very beginning of my work as a rabbi that's been a central dimension of what I've done. And this was a long time before there were any books about this, so you know I was doing this work before it became kind of normative to do it. And one of the things that actually made a big difference was the creation of a non-Orthodox *mikvah* in Los Angeles. At the time it was at the University of Judaism that was affiliated with \_\_\_\_\_ Movement and now it's independent. And once we had a *mikvah* that we could bring converts to, it also became a place where we could bring people for other life-cycle rituals. So over the years I have done rituals at this *mikvah*, when I first came you had to bring people to the ocean because there was no *mikvah* you could use as a reform rabbi, but with the University of Judaism's *mikvah*, all kinds of ceremonies, rituals ranging from you know healing after a divorce, healing after... adult survivors of childhood incest, major birthdays, healing related to finishing the treatment for cancer, those kinds of rituals as well as new beginning rituals, so over the years I have done hundreds of different rituals like that with different people at different stages in their life. Created a meaning ceremony early on before there were many meaning ceremonies. Issues related to pregnancy, miscarriage, abortion, those kinds of issues. A lot of thought and energy around menopause, so you know all different kinds of experiences that relate to women's experience. But what's interesting again, is once you pay attention to ... once you say, my experiences as a Jewish woman matters, I want to mark it Jewishly, the same thing is true for men. Some male experiences are already marked, *bar mitzvah*, *bris*, but then a lot that aren't like retirement and other kinds of experiences that are part of both men and women's lives. And so, those kinds of rituals are also part of the work that I do.

Emily Huebscher: Why were those rituals important to you?

Laura Geller: Because I learned when I was in rabbinical school is that there is no important moment in the lifetime of a Jew for which there is no blessing. And it turns out not to be true, so you have to create those blessings.

Emily Huebscher: Were you conscious of making any other choices in your rabbinate based on your gender?

Laura Geller: Again, gender is such a part of who you are, that's like asking are there any other choices that you made because you can't sing, or because you fell in love with somebody and want to live in the same community as that person. It is so much a part of who you are that you really can't separate it. On the other hand, I do think that part of the reason I chose to explore that possibility of becoming the rabbi at Temple Emanuel was because I never wanted to be a congregational rabbi; it was Hillel at college that captured me in terms of my Jewish identity so I wanted to work with college students. Did that for 14 years. I think I was the first HUC student to not do a congregational internship because I was so sure I never wanted to be in a congregation. Then after 14 years you know it was time for me to move on mostly because I stopped spending most of my time with undergraduates and was spending more and more of my time around university issues of spirituality in the academy and the faculty and all that kind of stuff and when you stop loving undergraduates that's the time to get out of Hillel. So, I was 44, no hold on, it was 1990, that I left Hillel so from '76-'90, and then I worked for a period of time with the American Jewish Congress which at the time was the progressive organization with the Jewish community. And that was terrific work. You know I was a real community leader at a time in Los Angeles when a lot of really fascinating things were happening, the riots, the police commission, all kinds of interesting stuff. I did a lot of work with \_\_\_\_ Jewish stuff, a lot of work around the Bosnia issue and I worked with the Islamic women's organization around the issue of rape in Bosnia so was that because of my gender or was that because those were the important political issues at the time, who knows. And then when the American Jewish Congress stopped being a liberal organization, I left and at that moment Temple Emanuel was looking for a new rabbi. In '92 there was a conference celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> year of the ordination of women, and I was asked to write a paper for HUC, for the conference which has been republished in a book by Indiana University, Indiana press...

Emily Huebscher: Edited by Dr. Zolla

Laura Geller: An article worth reading..

Emily Huebscher: Yes, I read that one.

Laura Geller: So I interviewed all these women about their career paths and one of the things that was really stunning to me as I did this... you know I was curious as to why women's careers looked different from men's, right, you know we've been out 20 years but still there are no women senior rabbis and dah dah dah, and so I interviewed all these different people and I discovered that many women who had been assistant or associate rabbis didn't want to be senior rabbis because their experience as being assistants or associates had been so bad they didn't want to be their seniors. Some of them had been badly mentored; some of them had been really badly mentored. And others of them just didn't want to have that kind of work-a-holic life with no balance or intimacy or whatever. And the more I sort of did this interviewing, the more I thought, well I wonder if you could do it differently? I mean is this the only way to be a senior rabbi. So I was really curious about it, so I thought well this is an interesting opportunity and anyway this congregation became available when I had this wonderful thought that Lenny \_\_\_\_ who now again is the placement person for the CCAR, he was at the Union at the time, and he said, you know, go for it, the congregation was in extreme distress, it had almost merged with another congregation, it was significantly in debt, and Lenny said to me, if you succeed it will be your success and if you fail, everybody will say it was impossible, so it was no risk. So I said, well if that's the case, I'll try it and I threw my *kippa* in the ring and to everybody's

surprise, theirs and mine, they hired me. And the surprise was I had had not a day of congregational experience, and I mean literally not a day, not a student pulpit, not an anything. But they were I think smart enough to realize that skills are transferable and I was either naïve enough or courageous enough to want to do something different and it's worked very well, I've really enjoyed my work a lot, and I think the congregation would say the same thing. But the point is that I think that part of what motivated me to apply was to see if I could do it differently and that maybe had something to do with gender.

Emily Huebscher:

Could you do it differently?

Laura Geller:

I think I have done it differently. I think we have a more collaborative team. I think again, the universe is changing and rabbis are different now so male rabbis and female rabbis are different; it isn't just women. But I do think it is clearly a collaborative staff, I've worked... my colleague, Jonathan Aaron I came in '94, he came in '96, my cantor Yonna Klever also came in '96, we've all been together a really long time, it doesn't usually happen that way. We have a new colleague who's just begun with us. The model in a major congregation used to be that there was a senior rabbi and the senior rabbi would hire an assistant and the assistant would work for 3-5 years and then the assistant would leave. When I began to work with Jonathan Aaron who was terrific I realized wanted him to be my partner for as long as he wanted to stay. And I actually had a conversation with some of the leaders in the CCAR relatively early in Jonathan's tenure, and when I said to them, describe to me a model of a career that a person stays as a partner, after how many years does the assistant become an associate and after how many years does he become a full rabbi, etc. and the leaders of the movement, I shall not name them, said, you don't want that, you want fresh blood, you want a new person every five years to bring energy into the congregation and I said no I don't want that. I want a different model, this is the guy I want to be working with and we work well together, help me figure it out. So in that sense I think it was a different model and in fact I think you see now that there are a lot of different models.

Emily Huebscher:

How much of the changes that happened in the rabbinate do you think were related to the introduction of women into it?

Laura Geller:

Well, as I said, I think everything and... I think everything. I think everything. That isn't the only thing but I think everything. Because as my friend often says it's not just add women and stir but the addition of women raises the question of what it really means to be inclusive, and not just inclusive in terms of who your rabbis are, but inclusive in terms of everything from how you think about God, to prayer, to ritual, to organizational structure, to people with disabilities to gays and lesbians, to Jews-by-choice you know all those people who have been not included when they're included the whole conversation is different. Right? The Jewish conversation has been profoundly changed because women are at the table. And women are at the table not just as rabbis but also as scholars, as lay leaders... so it isn't just about rabbis but it's a lot about inclusivity and women's energy.

Emily Huebscher:

What pressures were unique to you as a pioneer?

Laura Geller:

Interviews like this (laughter), you know people wanting to... you know at the beginning sort of wanting to sort of prove myself. I mean I still will only wear dresses and skirts on the *bima*. I won't wear pants. I'm probably the only person left who does this. Even women my age who were ordained a lot after me most of them wear pants. It was only relatively recently that I even began to wear pants to work.

Now why is that? I think it's because that at the beginning I wanted people to take me seriously and I needed to be serious about what I wore and stuff like that so I think that's an example of... at least at the beginning always looking over my shoulder. And here I am 30 x years later, I'm still wearing skirts. ... a small example. Just as an example, I was on a radio show early in my time Religion On The Line, and a person unnamed, but a major player in the Jewish community, asked me, what's more important to you your feminism or your Judaism?, so those kinds of questions were pretty typical for \_\_\_\_ I responded to him, what's more important to you your heart or your liver?, and he never invited me back on the show. So there was that kind of issue and I think it was... you know... but remember at the same time that women were rabbis, women were becoming senior partners in their law firms, some of the stuff isn't just about rabbis, it's about women becoming... opening up professions where there wasn't room for them before. \_\_\_\_\_ about that. It was challenging. When I first came to Emanuel in a way some of the people who had the hardest time with me were some women. And I'll never forget this one woman who said to me after I was hired she said, I think that you're terrific but I just want you to know I don't believe in women rabbis. And I didn't even understand the comment, 'cause it's like I don't believe in women rabbi's, is that like I don't believe in the Easter Bunny. Well, here I am, I happen to be a woman rabbi. And instead of being defensive I said, you know, well, let's see. And anyway years later that she came and apologized. to me. It was nice that she remembered that she had said it and that she came back and apologized but it was interesting that she said it. In my interview that asked me some pretty stupid questions that they probably wouldn't ask a man. One of the questions was, an older man asked me the question, do you have children, I understand that if your child's sick \_\_\_\_ but what will you do if you have a funeral? And I said, I've been a professional woman for 18 years and you manage, you have a husband and you have a child care person. Obviously your family in an emergency, comes first, and of course the same question should be asked of a man if the question should be asked at all. I remember that was 1994 and the world has continued to change since then. I mean it is really amazing how much the world had changed since I was ordained. I recently spoke...the Jewish Journal organized a seminar, and they interviewed 7 women rabbis, it would be absolutely worth it if you could get a transcript of that, the Jewish Journal because I described what the world was like when I was ordained and how it has changed. And it was even interesting for me cause there were some really fascinating, really fascinating study that was done by the Women's Rabbinic Network about why people were ambivalent about women as senior rabbis.

Emily Huebscher: Yes, I look at that as well.

Laura Geller: I mean did you look at the list of concerns, I was unbelievable.

Emily Huebscher: I did, my favorite was the walking to the building at night.

Laura Geller: Unbelievable, you know, but that was my lifetime.

Emily Huebscher: Do you have a favorite of those?

Laura Geller: You know I don't remember them all, but I was just incredibly surprised. And then there's that famous Mortimer Ostow article, he was a psychiatrist who worked with the Jewish Theological Seminary, who argued against the ordination of women because it would emasculate men, and he spoke about it in quite specific psycho-sexual terms, worth taking a look at, Mortimer Ostow or Ostrow? From Jewish Theological Seminar the articles probably in 1971 or something, \_\_\_\_\_

Emily Huebscher: I want to turn now to look at the small issue of creating an image. Joy Levette, who was ordained from RSC in '81, wrote an article about two models for women in the rabbinate, the navy-blue suit model who saw herself as the same as a male rabbi and the goddess rabbi who saw herself as totally the opposite as a male rabbi. And if that's a continuum, can you place yourself on it.

Laura Geller: Right in the middle. I mean I don't actually think that... I mean I understand what Joy is saying and there certainly are another kind of *Shechinah*, you know, but it isn't just women, it's sort of new age-y, I'm not so sure it's gender honestly. Some of it is politics, some of it is lifestyle, some of it is gender, many of those rabbis are women, but not all of them, and then the more corporate model some of it also depends on the nature of your synagogue. So I told you I don't wear pants on the *bima*. Does that make me a blue suit? Probably... I don't think Joy would put me in that list, but if you looked at my clothes, not always, I sometimes I wear long skirts, and sometimes flowing skirts but most often not. I don't actually think that those categories are just about women; there are men who wear suits all the time and there are men who wear more casual clothes. So I think a little bit, it's the same. Maybe the difference is that people don't comment on it so much. It is not uncommon even now for people to say cut your hair or over-comment on clothes. On the other hand, I have gotten some comments on some of my male colleagues clothes as well. So it isn't just \_\_\_\_.

Emily Huebscher: Have you gotten any inappropriate comments?

Laura Geller: You know it depends on how you define an inappropriate comment. I do think that when you've been in a community a long time and I communicate to my congregation that I'm open and available and that I like them and that, you know, they can tell me what they feel so it's not a surprise when somebody will say, you know you really need your hair cut or... let's see... there have been some kind of funny comments over the years that I have often wished I had kept a journal because I could go back and find these things, sure people have said inappropriate things over the years but not, nothing that rises to the level of scandalous. And I'm not saying that if you don't have a sense of humor you shouldn't be doing this work, but...

Emily Huebscher: Did you feel challenged in fashioning a rabbinic image?

Laura Geller: I don't think that I consciously fashioned a rabbinic image; I consciously fashioned a vision of the communities in which I work and live. My rabbinic image is that I am the... this is my Jewish community and I am trying to \_\_\_\_ and I have partners in that. And those partners are often lay people as well as other clergy. What is the real model? Something between *amarad'atra* and *madrichut manit* and *madricha uhanit* and you know partner collaborative partner, and sometimes leader, and teacher – it's all that, and it is about an image but not about how I look, it's about what I do, I want people to understand that all of it comes out of my commitment to Jewish tradition and my connection to God. What is the image that I project? The image I project is a serious, joyful Jew who is nurtured by Jewish tradition and who struggles with a relationship to God and who leads a spiritual community \_\_\_\_\_. So it's not about cultivating an image, it's really not.

Emily Huebscher: What assumptions do you feel were made about you?

Laura Geller: When?

Emily Huebscher: At the beginning.

Laura Geller: At the very beginning when I was in rabbinical school a lot of people that I was there to prove that women could be rabbis or that I was looking to get married. Neither

of those were true. But those were assumptions that in some ways made rabbinical school slightly problematic. Assumptions were also made about me was that I was smart because I had come from a good college. Whether that was true or not, but it was interesting. The projections that people made depending on where you went to school. And that was helpful for me, frankly, because while some of the learning came easily to me, the Hebrew never did. So it was good that people started with their own perceptions that I was smart. You know, that I am strong, that I am sort of, not afraid to say what I believe to be true. That I am a risk taker, that I love what I do, that my family is important to me - those kinds of assumptions.

Emily Huebscher: Do you feel like that you were part of the group that shaped the image of future female rabbis?

Laura Geller: I think that we all are. But absolutely, I was the third woman to be ordained and the second one has disappeared. And I was the first one to be married and to have kids. A different model from the model of Sally. And also, when I became the rabbi at Emanuel, the news story was Woman Rabbi Shatters the Glass Ceiling, the stained glass ceiling, right? But the real story was, you can start as a Hillel Director and you can end up being the senior rabbi at Temple Emanuel. At the time I went to rabbinical school, if you ever wanted to be the rabbi at Temple Emanuel, you had to first be an assistant and then you had to have a solo somewhere and you would move around a lot, you know, that turns out not to be true. Right! My career proves that you can do what you love and you'll end up loving all sorts of different kinds of \_\_\_\_\_ and that there are all kinds of ways to be a rabbi and there's not a path that is set in stone. That really changed in my lifetime and clearly I was one of the people who modeled that changed.

Emily Huebscher: What do you think was your greatest success as a rabbi?

Laura Geller: You know, how can I even answer that question. At Hillel, there were many successes ranging from convincing the University of Southern California to stop paying the fees for senior administrators in clubs that discriminated against, the private clubs that discriminated against Blacks, women, Jews, etc.; to the conference that I talked about, that was an major accomplishment, in the American Jewish Congress the work that we did, we created the Jewish Feminist Center, we did incredibly significant work around urban affairs. In my congregation there's just all kinds of success. I mean the greatest success in my rabbinate is... I just feel so grateful to be able to do this work, genuinely grateful; it's really a gift. Even the parts that I can't stand are also part of that gift.

Emily Huebscher: What are those?

Laura Geller: Fundraising is a challenge to me and by the way I do think that gender is an issue here. Some of my colleagues who are very successful fundraisers go and play golf with their *balabims*. I can't do that. I'm not a golfer number one and number two typically these are men. It's harder to do I think given the nature of rabbis as fundraisers it often comes out of these kinds of cultivated friendship that are slightly more complicated when the rabbis a woman and the potential donor is a man.

Emily Huebscher: In what way do you think that being a woman facilitated your success?

Laura Geller: You know it's put me at the forefront of lots of interesting conversations and meeting. For the early part of my career, I was included in things that I might not have been included in now when there are so many women rabbis. But at the beginning whether it was the CCAR leadership or interesting conferences, or all kinds of symposia or whatever. people need be inclusive and to include a woman and there were not that many people so I

got to do stuff that I might not have done if there had been 400 woman rabbis as opposed to five and all that was interesting and often challenging, I mean for the early part of my career I was often the only woman in a room full of men, and sometimes I was lonely, and sometimes it was hard and sometimes people would say stupid things, but it was always interesting.

Emily Huebscher: What aspect of the rabbinate do you enjoy the most?

Laura Geller: I can't even answer that question because sometimes it's the one on one spiritual-direction stuff, being there for people at moments of liminality, loss or joy, whatever but often it's just thinking about synagogue transformation and being loved and larger systems stuff you know it's... I enjoy a lot of different parts of my work which is part of what I love the social justice work is also very central to what gives me pleasure and challenge and is harder to do in the context of the congregation than it was at Hillel; the world is more complicated. My congregation's not a uniformly liberal congregation and so there're often are issues in which my passions don't always correspond to the passions of some of my leadership so that's an interesting challenge. I've been very supported in my spiritual practice by the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, very grateful for that, Joy and I were in that same first cohort of rabbis trained by the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, and that has really helped me sort of open my heart to people who's politics are quite different from mine and ultimately made me an infinitely more successful rabbi and person, I would say.

Emily Huebscher: What do you think it is about you that made you able to succeed?

Laura Geller: Honestly, I didn't know what I was doing. In the years after I was ordained I would give these speeches around the country and people would come up to me and they would say, I always wanted to be a rabbi but I knew I couldn't; I wish I had. I didn't know I couldn't. I was raised a reform Jew. Judaism was part of the fabric of my family but it wasn't totally central. We went to synagogue but we weren't exactly the most active family. It never occurred to me that a woman couldn't be a rabbi. So when I applied to rabbinical school I didn't honestly understand the extent to which what I was doing was iconoclastic. I just didn't understand it. When I got to Israel that first year, I had a tough time that first year, because all of a sudden it dawned on me that this was much more complicated. I remember there was some kind of inter-seminary something or other that we did that first year at HUC and some orthodox guy who's telling me that I can't drink the wine from the Havdallah cup because I'm a women. You know, oh my God, it's something that I never even thought about before. You know I didn't really know that much about Havdallah but the idea that women... good that I didn't know any of that stuff because if I had... if I knew that this whatever was being viewed as me proving that women could do this, I never would have done it because wasn't what this was about. So, I think that's the honest answer to your question.

Emily Huebscher: What advice do you have for future rabbis?

Laura Geller: This is just wonderful work. You have to have a sense of humor. Understand that your relationship to God will evolve over time. Take care of your own inner life. It is ultimately about creating a Jewish life that is nurturing and meaningful and for me God is very much a part of the story in a way that has evolved significantly over the years of the rabbinate. Really my advice is to take time for yourself, take time for study, and don't let anyone tell you that you have to do it a certain way or you can't do it. In certain ways, it's not true.

Emily Huebscher: Thank you so much. Is there anything else you'd like to add.

Laura Geller: Is it possible to get a copy?

Emily Huebscher: Absolutely.

**Interviewer:** Emily Huebscher, 5<sup>th</sup> year student HUC

**With:** Rabbi Rosalind A. Gold, 1978

**Date:** January 28, 2010

Emily Huebscher: Hi Rabbi Gold, Hi this is Emily Huebscher.

Rosalind Gold: Hi Emily it's Roslyn.

Emily Huebscher: Sorry about that. I just wanted to remind you that I'm recording this conversation for the American Jewish Archives.

Rosalind Gold: OK.

Emily Huebscher: How's everything going today.

Rosalind Gold: Fine thank you.

Emily Huebscher: I'm going to start with questions about feminism and femininity.

Rosalind Gold: OK

Emily Huebscher: Can we start... when you first thought about becoming a Rabbi.

Rosalind Gold: I was working at the Hillel at UCLA and actually the idea was suggested by my Hillel Rabbi, Richard Levi. At the time I thought it was a very funny idea, but the more I thought about it, the more I thought, yea, sure, why not.

Emily Huebscher: What role did being a woman play in your Rabbinate?

Rosalind Gold: In my Rabbinate?

Emily Huebscher: Um hum.

Rosalind Gold: Um. You know, it's so hard..., I've been thinking about some of these questions, it's so hard to separate about being a woman and being a Rabbi for me because I'm both. And I can't... You know I am a Rabbi; I am a woman. It's so hard for me to try and figure out what aspects of who I am as a Rabbi are because I'm a woman and how much is just because that's who I am as a person. So I would say... you asked me what role, right? I would say that anything that had specifically to do with being a woman for me in my rabbinate... the effects were more external, how other people reacted to me or related to me. I don't know that they are internal again because it's who I am. I can't separate being a woman out from who I am. Could one go back in history and say I was socialized in a certain way and I express myself in a certain way and I approach things in a certain way because I was socialized that way obviously since the time I was born, as a woman, sure. And there are certainly aspects, the kind of consensus building person, the peace maker person, the conciliator person that are a part of my socialization as a woman, but there are men who do those things too, so I can't point to anything in particular within myself in terms of who I am as a Rabbi, so would again say that most of the way that being a woman has impacted my Rabbinate is in how others have responded and related to me. Long answer.

Emily Huebscher: That's good. Do you consider yourself a feminist?

Rosalind Gold: Yes.

Emily Huebscher: And how do you define feminism?

Rosalind Gold: I would define feminism as the belief that neither men nor women should be defined solely by gender roles, by traditional gender roles. That's what I think of as feminism.

Emily Huebscher: Has that definition changed through the experience in you have had in the Rabbinate?

Rosalind Gold: No, if anything, I think it's gotten stronger, actually. I will tell you that I was not.... if somebody had asked me in my earlier days if I was a feminist, I would say yes. But I think of thought of in terms of then as more as, yes, I guess it has changed, because then I thought of it more in terms as women can do anything, that is feminism. But now I think of it as much more than that now... because men can do anything too.

Emily Huebscher: Did you ever make conscious choices about liturgy or sermon topics based on being a woman or feminism.

Rosalind Gold: Probably if I did they were probably more on the cautious side of... I shouldn't talk about that because I am a woman and everyone will think it's just my woman's issue as opposed to a Jewish issue or a general issue. I know that there were times I wanted to talk about what I would call feminist issues that I probably backed away from doing so or did so much less strongly than I felt. ...just because I didn't want people to think, oh yeah, there she goes, you know, waving that stupid flag again.

Emily Huebscher: Did you get comments like that when you did talk about them.

Rosalind Gold: Um, not really. I think people made assumptions about what I thought or what I felt and sometimes responded differently to things that I said in a sermon, that I thought well God, where did that come from, but not real often, not real often, well I can't even think of a specific example...

Well one example might be when I talked, it was I think some anniversary of Sally Priesand's ordination and I spoke about women in the Rabbinate I think after I'd been in my congregation for like 15 years, we're not talking about new. I talked about some of the difficulties that I had had in the early years, and getting into school and my school years and all of that, and somebody made a comment about, it was a woman of course, who said something about well, you know women in other professions had all those troubles too, yeah it was a women who was a physician, and women in other professions had all those issues too and you're making such a big deal about it, and I thought I'm really not making a big deal out of it, I'm just giving you some history, I don't think I whined when I said it, I'm just telling it. But it was that.. That wasn't common but it happened.

Emily Huebscher: Were you conscious about making any other choices in your Rabbinate based on your gender.

Rosalind Gold: I often made choices like making sure there was a good gender mix on the bima. ...being careful that things weren't dominated by women in my congregational life. Or when it was up to me to choose people or to assemble a committee or any group, I was always very, very careful to make sure it was well balanced in gender as much as I could. That kind of thing. I can't think of other specific choices that I made that had to do with being female.

Emily Huebscher: Were you conscious of a changing Rabbinate by virtue of the presence of women in the Rabbinate.

Rosalind Gold: Yeah and I must say it wasn't always a happy awareness. it was sometimes, there was a., I mean I go way back, and there was a real intimacy and closeness in the first years, of like the women's Rabbinic Network, that kind of thing where we all knew each other. We all shared.. We were all in similar places in placement and dealing with family stuff. And as the WRN got bigger and bigger it felt less of a home for

me and I still feel that. I mean I go to the WRN, and I don't know most of the people there anymore. And I miss knowing everybody; I miss the closeness of it. I've enjoyed meeting many of the younger women that's for sure. But I miss what the WRN used to be for me that it is no longer, or if it is, it's only with a small clique of people instead of with the whole group.

Emily Huebscher: And how 'bout for change of the Rabbinate in general, men and women.

Rosalind Gold: Oh for sure, I think that women made a huge difference in... well the acceptability of parental leave and not just maternity leave. The acceptability of "no I can't do that because I 'm going to be with my family" response to something. People making choices that were better for their family and their kids and not necessarily choices for the quote unquote success of their Rabbinate. Changing what it means to be a successful Rabbi. I absolutely think women are responsible for that. ... Meaning that not everybody wants to be the Rabbi of the biggest. That some people understand that being the Rabbi of a smaller place where you can know everybody and be more individually involved, or more intimately involved with individual lives, that there is a value to that and that bigger isn't always better.

I have very clear memories of the leaders then of the CCAR talking about, I remember who used to say the cream rises to the top. That the quote unquote best Rabbis were the Rabbis the ones who became the Rabbis of the largest congregations, and it was always congregations. God forbid you became a chaplain, fey, Hillel Rabbi I mean those were the losers, and I say that not that they were but they were considered very often like that people that really couldn't really make it And I think women who have made those choices based on different values have helped to change what it means, again, to be a successful Rabbi. To be a winner in the rabbinate. Sometimes to be a winner in the Rabbinate is not to be the biggest corporate Rabbi there is.

Emily Huebscher: Can you identify some of the pressures that were unique to you as a pioneer?

Rosalind Gold: I got asked to speak so many times about women in the Rabbinate and when I suggested actually, once in a while, that I speak, even fairly recently, I got asked to do a scholar in resident's gig somewhere and I had suggested some topics that I might speak on and the person finally came back and said well we were really hoping you'd talk about women in the Rabbinate and I said oh Christ it's been how many years since there have been women in the Rabbinate and you're still wanting me to talk about that stuff, so that's been kind of frustrating. I can tell you once in a while you really do get to talk about something else.

Emily Huebscher: Sorry I'm not doing my thesis on something else.

Rosalind Gold: Oh that's right. Here you are. You're calling me. That's perfectly fine. Having been asked again and again and still, to do speeches on women in the Rabbinate. Pressures, yeah. I think there was a feeling that was probably well based in truth and reality that if you made a mistake or if you screwed up and if you didn't do something good that it would reflect poorly on all other women. I'll never forget the comment Mindy Portnoy made. She had bought a new pair of shoes for her ordination, and they were heels, and she was not accustomed to wearing heels very often, I still don't think she wears heels probably very often, and she just said I hope to God I don't fall and break my neck and embarrass all women rabbis when I walk across the *bima*, at Temple Emanuel in New York.

because it was this fancy polished marble stuff. So yeah, there was a sense that you knew that what you'd do would reflect on all women and for many people you were the first woman rabbi they've ever met, and that they were going to form their ideas about all women rabbis based on their feeling about you. So, yes, that was a lot of pressure. I still feel that to an extent but much, much less because I'm not the only woman rabbi that most people have met, if they've met any women rabbis at all or if they've met any rabbis I should say.

Emily Huebscher: So what other assumptions were made about you as a female Rabbi?

Rosalind Gold: Well, I would say in the very early years there were people who assumed that I went into the Rabbinic to meet guys went to rabbinic school, not went into the rabbinic, went to Rabbinic school to meet guys and I would marry into it. I think there were assumptions about my politics that I would be, which I am actually, pretty left wing, liberal on stuff, ..but nobody had a right to assume that before they knew.

That I would be much less sensitive to *halachic* issues and traditional issues, that I would kind of reject traditional Jewish forms. Because obviously as a woman, I had no... If I as a woman decided to go into the rabbinic that I obviously didn't care anything about *halacha* or traditional Jewish forms of expression and that I would have rejected them all. Those are the ones that come to mind.

Emily Huebscher: Rabbi Joy Levette wrote an article explaining that she saw two modes of Rabbis when women started entering the Rabbinic, there was the navy blue-suit Rabbi who really models herself after the male rabbinic and the goddess Rabbi who models herself as the opposite of the male rabbinic. If that's a spectrum, can you place yourself on it.

Rosalind Gold: (Giggle) You know, intellectually I would have put myself.. in the early days, intellectually I would have put myself closer to the blue suit rabbi, but I think in reality, my rabbinic ended up being more of, I hate to use that word goddess, but more different than I thought it would be, more different in terms of being closer to that goddess image than the blue suit image.

Emily Huebscher: How so?

Rosalind Gold: Well, again in the early days when there were no other women around, when we used to get together we would talk about our clothes, and how many... what color suits we should buy and did we cross our legs on the *bima*, and trying to make ourselves Pass in a way in a world of male Rabbis, and not wanting to be seen as women rabbis. We were Rabbis. We just wanted to be seen as Rabbis, not women Rabbis. And I think it took a while for me anyway in my Rabbinic to find myself as a woman in the Rabbinic and to be more comfortable away from the blue suit. And I'm not a suit wearer at all. That's a funny image. I'm neither a goddess nor a suit wearer. But if you want to use those models, I think I had thought my rabbinic would be more of a blue suit rabbinic and it turned into more of a goddess rabbinic.

Emily Huebscher: What kind of conversations that you had about the image.

Rosalind Gold: We didn't want to draw attention to being women. Nobody talked about wearing lacy anything. We worried about our earrings dangling too much and distracting people from what we were saying. How much makeup did we wear? There was

just, I remember, a lot of talk about how were we supposed to look as Rabbis because we didn't have any other Rabbis other women Rabbis to model ourselves after.

Emily Huebscher: Who did you turn to for model as what you should look like. Were there public figures?

Rosalind Gold: I would say women... other professional women, lawyers, professional women, doctors at least get to wear those coats over their clothes. Yeah, I guess we modeled after other women we saw in the public eye. Probably politicians, although I mean we're talking about Bella Abzug and her crazy hats were the people around, or Gloria Steinam and who would be Gloria Steinam?, nobody, because she was kind of sui generis. So I guess we looked at other women in the business world, not wanting to bring attention to ourselves as women.

Emily Huebscher: Do you think that the pioneer women shaped how the future women would look and speak and behave?

Rosalind Gold: Probably, except that my sense of the next generation of women is that they were very different than us. We were very concerned about placement and numbers and would we get paid as much as the men and stuff like that. And my experience of the next generation was that they were much less concerned about that; they kind of took it for granted and they were the ones who really helped to evolve more about the goddess rabbi. The ones that were clearer in their feminism, clearer in their sense of themselves as women. They didn't have to prove themselves maybe as much. Nobody, nobody, I mean... I was constantly having to ... or felt, that I was constantly having to prove that no, I didn't get in on some kind of affirmative action program and yes, I actually studied as much, and I was either as bright or as stupid as any other rabbi. And that women should be able to be as bright or as stupid as any other rabbi. Everything felt like a test. Everything felt like a test.

I once made a comment actually that I had forgotten about. A woman who is now has been a colleague in the area for a long time, who is much younger than I, made a comment that the first time she heard... I don't remember this, but I can imagine myself saying it, that I was part of a panel and I think I stood up and said "if I just stand here and turn around and walk, will that be enough to show you." That's what you came for didn't say it quite like that. But basically, you came to see what a woman rabbi looks like. Well, here it is. I had this feeling that I really didn't have to do anything else. Just stand there so they could all get a gander at what this strange creature was. I think I said it nicer, though. And then went on to probably try to sound intelligent. But that was what it was like in the beginning of always feeling kind of watched. What weird creature is this thing that went into the rabbinate?

Emily Huebscher: What weird creature was it?

Rosalind Gold: It was me, it was just me. The feeling of, hey, I went into the rabbinate for the same reason as every other Rabbi. or reasons that any other Rabbi went into the Rabbinate. You know, I'm fairly intelligent and I can do this stuff. It's strange to remember those days. I hear myself talking about them with a certain amount of, not anger, but making it sound like it was terrible, it wasn't terrible; I was happy being a Rabbi but I wasn't happy having to deal with other people's perceptions. I felt like a lot of time was wasted on getting kind of up to speed. You know every Rabbi start out as a new relationship whether you're giving a speech somewhere or your like I had to work hard just to get to that starting level where we can say OK, I'm the Rabbi and you're the whoever and let's go on from here and build this relationship whatever it is If it's just an hour's speech or it's a 20

year working relationship or that kind of stuff. Is that clear? I always felt like I started out, not with strikes against me, but having to prove that we can meet on an equal basis, whatever it was.

Emily Huebscher: Were you conscious any decisions you made in your speech or behavior?

Rosalind Gold: No, we couldn't go that far.

Emily Huebscher: Do you have any stories about people commenting on your image?

Rosalind Gold: Physically?

Emily Huebscher: Ym hum.

Rosalind Gold: Yea, I had one person when I first came to my job actually here in Reston, A woman... of course; it's always a woman, always a woman.

That would be an interesting thesis. I wish somebody would write a thesis about why it is that some of the people that behave the worst to women Rabbis are other women. That's a whole other deal.

Oh yea, this woman.. I had a, this really cool outfit that a just bought. Bright yellow; it was a skirt and top, very cute, it had cap sleeves, there not it's not regular sleeves, their between sleeveless and regular sleeve. A woman came up to me after services and said she thought I was wrong that I exposed so much of my arm on the *bima*. And I thought, well, thank you for sharing that. But I did wear it again. Although it seems to me sometimes I would wear it with a sweater now that I think about it. But a part of it was just my own sense of, that if somebody says that you immediately become insecure and you think, well gee is that wrong to wear But people used to come onto the *bima* sometimes sleeveless. And it's not like I'm such a moderate dresser to begin with. But I thought it was strange. I thought gee aren't we in a reform congregation here and I don't think that much of my arm is actually showing. And what's this about. That didn't happen too often. But I do remember that one time it happen

Rosalind Gold: I don't know if you're going to interview Myra Soifer.

She's the queen of great stories. She has some great stories about clothes. I hope you have a chance to interview her.

Emily Huebscher: I have an appointment set up with her.

Rosalind Gold: Good. You will be entertained. She's wonderful. Ask her about *bima* clothes stories.

Emily Huebscher: Do you feel like the image of the woman Rabbi has changed over the course of your rabbinate.

Rosalind Gold: The image of...? Well, for sure it has, there are so many different women in the rabbinate now. So, again, assuming someone is somewhat involved in the Jewish world and they would have met more than just their rabbi. That they would have gone to a bar mitzvah somewhere else or gone to an American Jewish Committee Meeting and seen a woman leading it. Yes, the image has broadened. As women... Just different expressions of how women deal with their own sense of power and authority in their roles. Yes, people have seen many different images of women Rabbis now.

Emily Huebscher: Do you think how women dress reflects their sense of power and authority?

Rosalind Gold: No, no, I wasn't even talking about dress. Are you talking about like physical images?

Emily Huebscher: Yes, they way women dress and act and speak.

Rosalind Gold: Yes, I would hold with that answer then. Yes, as more and more women have become rabbis, more and more expressions of physical and intellectual, and .... yeah, there are all kinds of women who are rabbis now. And they dress differently, and express themselves differently, and choose their sermon topics differently, they are just, I don't know, it has just expanded to everywhere from.... I don't know too many blue-suited rabbis any more. I would say more women are on the scale further away from blue suits and closer to goddesses now. They're more comfortable with themselves as women in the rabbinate and not just as rabbis.

Emily Huebscher: So I want to move on to professional realities of the woman rabbi. What are some ways in which being a woman facilitated your success?

Rosalind Gold: Ah, you're assuming that I have success.

Emily Huebscher: You did.

Rosalind Gold: Thank You. I got a lot a speaking engagement. The same thing I said annoyed the heck out of me before. I was asked to give a lot of talks. I think that kind of exposure. No, now wait a minute.. let me go back, does that have to do with success?

My success as a rabbi, that's a good question.

I will say this in all humility, that I think that whatever success or lack thereof I've had in my rabbinate has to do with just who I am, my personality. Whatever strengths I may have in dealing with people. Getting a sense... That's probably my greatest strength as a rabbi and as a person is that I can get a sense of people fairly quickly, and I'm usually right. How they seem to me. Are they telling the truth, are they sincere, are they honest, what goes into them. I have a good people sense. And I think that whatever success I've had in the rabbinate. And I'm considering success again not making the biggest salary I'm considering the things that I think make me a good rabbi. It's because I have a good sense of people and because I love teaching and I treat people respectfully when I teach them. Now, does either one of them have to do with being a woman? I don't know. Those are probably the two greatest strengths I have as a rabbi. And I'm not sure either one of them has to do with being a woman. But it's me, it's who I am, and I am a woman. I can't divide divine that out for you.

Emily Huebscher: What do you think the greatest challenges were to you.

Rosalind Gold: In the beginning it was being taken seriously as a rabbi. In all aspects of that, interviewing for jobs, and then once you got a job, kind of establishing yourself in that job. And I think that also as I person I was sort of naïve and used to take things at surface value. It took me a little while to dig. But once I starting digging, I kept digging, just in assessing thing. So, I think those were the biggest challenges at the beginning.

Over the years, you know, I'm not sure, well..., challenges in the rabbinate? You should have probably asked me these questions 6 years ago when I was still thinking more about my active rabbinate. I think one of the biggest challenges for me in my rabbinate was being able to say no, and still to be comfortable with myself when I wasn't able to please people. Which may be a feminist thing. You know you want to make everybody happy and when you're a rabbi I don't think you can make everybody happy. Being able to hang on to my own values and what I know was right even when it made people unhappy.

Emily Huebscher: Would you consider your experience in the rabbinate more positive or negative?

Rosalind Gold: More positive, more positive.

Emily Huebscher: What do you feel was your greatest success as a rabbi?

Rosalind Gold: I am a very good teacher and I believe that if I were to point to one thing in my rabbinate that that I did that probably meant the most, oy, well, I'm going to stick with teacher and various aspects of teaching. My work with kids, particularly older kids, I was very successful in doing that and working with conversion students. I loved it. I loved that work. I miss that work actually. So I so myself as a teacher was my greatest success.

Emily Huebscher: Would you say that was the aspect of your rabbinate that you enjoyed the most.

Rosalind Gold: Not necessarily, I enjoyed it. In general what I enjoyed the most... well.. teaching.. but being with people at moments in their lives when they were facing some kind of a crisis or major change. Crisis sometimes has negative overtones, lets say major change. Life events. Being able to share that and make that more gentle. Whether it was planning for a wedding or funeral, whichever it was, helping to make that passage more gentle and more meaningful.

Emily Huebscher: How much of your overall experience was related to your being a woman?

Rosalind Gold: Again hard to say. I really can't separate out the woman part from the me part. I really can't. I can't answer that question.

Emily Huebscher: What was it about you that made you able to succeed as a pioneer?

Rosalind Gold: I'm very stubborn. I am; I'm very stubborn. Once I set my mind to doing something, it takes a lot to distract me from doing it. I have a need to succeed at what I do. So I think it was that need that kept me going at times when it was hard, and lonely, and won't even say hard, I will say lonely hard, when there weren't a lot of other women around. To me being in the company and support of women is very important and there weren't always women around to do that. You have to work hard to find a community sometimes. A need to succeed. Well and also I would not say that either of my parents would have define themselves as feminists but they always told me that I could do whatever I set my mind to do. So why not the rabbinate like anything else. Well, they were incredible surprised and shocked when I decided to go into the rabbinate. They raised me to do whatever I wanted to do without the expectation that their daughter would be a rabbi. So I think it was kind of like, OK, This is what I want to do, and then I went and did it. I didn't think oh wow, how weird, a woman in the rabbinate. It's me and I want to be a rabbi and I happen to be a woman.

Emily Huebscher: So do you have any advice for future rabbis?

Rosalind Gold: Oo, advice for future rabbi. I would say that they should hang on... that they should know who they are and not let other people define them and I'm not even thinking in terms of people defining what a woman rabbi is but just in general. I was involved in the ethics committee for a while and saw a lot of people who made a lot of incredibly stupid mistakes and very bad choices. I found that people that were most vulnerable to making those bad choices, and I'm not talking about the sociopaths, I'm talking about people that made the bad choices. were people who didn't have enough sense of themselves and who needed the rabbinate to define them. Needed their work to define who they were as a human being. So I would say know who you are, enjoy who you are, stick to your values, and don't believe what you read about yourself that other people have written. Sometimes I used to give a sermon and somebody would say afterwards, That was

the best sermon in the world and da da da.. and I understand that maybe something I said that hit them at a point they needed to hear that thing... But I would know myself that I really didn't give much to that sermon, and it wasn't the best sermon I could have written on that topic and I was lazy that week, or I was busy that week or I procrastinated that week, but I could of done better. And so I think you should be your own best and worst critic and not worry so much about what other people think. There has to be a YOU or you start believing your press and you're going to enjoy being up on that pedestal too much. Fall down is nasty. I also think the people who are most happily retired are the people who didn't need their work to make them happy. Who liked their work who hopefully loved their work, but who had a life. So that would be my advice.

Emily Huebscher: Thank you so much for answering all my questions.

Rosalind Gold: Well, you're welcome. Tell me again what your thesis topic is.

Emily Huebscher: I'm trying to describe the experience that the pioneering women had in the rabbinate. How they used their femaleness, their femininity, however they saw themselves as feminist to succeed. How they looked and behaved and acted. How their experiences were shaped by their gender.

Rosalind Gold: Well, I'll be interested to read it.

Emily Huebscher: Well you said you didn't want to believe what you read.

Rosalind Gold: Well I'll read what you read about the other women.

**Interviewer:** Emily Huebscher, 5<sup>th</sup> year student HUC

**With:** Rabbi Debra Hachen, 1980

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Emily Huebscher: Remind you that I'm going to be recording these interviews for the American Jewish Archives. My thesis is on the Professional realities and image and use of feminism in the rabbinate, for women pioneers, women ordained in the first 10 years. When you first thought about becoming a rabbi?

Debra Hachen: When I was around 11. There weren't any women rabbis yet then in 1965 and I was sitting in the synagogue and watching my father who's a rabbi lead services and praying like I did on ever Friday night with my family and I just had some sense of that this is what I'm supposed to do too.

Emily Huebscher: Feminist?

Debra Hachen: Yes I consider myself a feminist in the way that we used the language in the 70s/80s that is a person who in the simplest original meaning of it for me, being a person who believes that women can do the same kind of things that men do, that there shouldn't be any culturally determined differences between what men and women can do in the workplace or generally in the home. So I think the original feminism was that we have the right to say things can't be limited only be to men in work or in positions of leadership. The kind of feminist who looks back and identifies where there's been sexism. Feminism had as its counterpart, sexism. Feminism has developed a lot since then but that's the original kind of feminism my period in the late 60s, early 70s when I was going to college the opposite of sexism, there were women's rights, women should have a full voice, women should have the same job opportunities, women should be paid the same, shouldn't be relegated to one kind of way of life as opposed to having everything open to them as it was to men. But of course feminism has then changed, that's not the modern definition of feminism. It became a philosophy and outlook that goes beyond gender. But I grew up in the original feminist times.

Emily Huebscher: So has your personal definition also changed?

Debra Hachen: I just don't use the word any more, I don't say today "I'm a feminist" because I think that feminist is an old-fashioned word like saying I'm a Hebrew instead of saying I'm a Jew. So, for me, I don't find it a really good moniker. It doesn't communicate clearly what it means any more, then I have to have post-feminist this and that, and all different kinds of terminology, modernity can't be used by itself anymore, even words like autonomy don't have the same meaning. So I'm not so sure that's such a great word any more, but I'm committed to the same things that feminism stood for back then.

Emily Huebscher: So what role woman played in your rabbinate?

Debra Hachen: We had a big debate when I was in rabbinic school, my first year in Jerusalem, these are the old things that used to be discussed. It's not the same things I don't think as for people like you. Some other time we should have a discussion like that. We would argue, are you a woman rabbi or are you a rabbi who is a woman, that was the big discussion that would go on. Are you a rabbi first and your being a women is just a quality that shouldn't be distinguished like any other quality like being tall or short or you could be into social action or be into worship or whatever it is, being a woman is just an adjective or is there something essential about being a woman that makes you different as a

rabbi. That was a big part of the debates when I was going through rabbinic school. At the time, at the beginning I was more, I am a rabbi who happens to be a woman. And a woman just like a man should have the chance to be a rabbi and we're going to be the same kind of rabbi as the men are. I came down more on that side of it. I wasn't going into the rabbinate to prove something about being a woman or to prove something about feminism, or to bring a certain feminist attitude towards it. For me, feminism was a half a step already ahead of me meaning that when I went through the camping movement there was already egalitarianism, in NiFTY there was already egalitarianism, at least we felt there was, we were unaware of some of the things that weren't so equal. But we sort of felt like we were the first generation flowing right behind all of the changes, that there was still a lot that we had to do, and not even a generation we were like a year behind but we were the group that was going right through it; the first group where it was ok to stand up and say we're equal. So, how does being a woman affect my rabbinate? There are two ways to that question and I don't know which one you want to talk about, Emily, one is how did other people see my being a woman affect my rabbinate or did I bring anything from my gender into my rabbinate?

Emily Huebscher: I'm interested in both and sort of how they played against each other.

Debra Hachen: I would say that for me in the first 10 years of my rabbinate I was really committed to, I am a rabbi, I just happen to be a woman and therefore downplayed anything about being a woman. I didn't hide being a woman but I didn't articulate that I was bringing anything because I was a woman into my rabbinate. It was like proving that I can do the same things that the men do, they're not male things to do. So I had a lots of opportunities to get that message out; I used to go out and speak about things like this at congregations. I was the first woman ordained rabbi in all of New England and for the first 4 or 5 years the only one before anyone else was up there. I would speak at Hadasah groups and other places and I saw my role as getting people to visualize a woman in the role as rabbi. It wasn't about bringing any special women qualities. Just breaking the barrier, oh, so now women can be doctors and so can men, and now women can be rabbis and so can men. And one of the best examples of that kind of thinking that was going on then was rabbi Bob Miller in Newton who invited me to come and speak at his congregation and he said I specifically don't want you to speak, because a lot of people used asked to me speak on anything that had to do with women, don't speak on the *midrash* about Eve or speak about the role of women in Judaism today, I don't want you to speak on any women's topic, I want you to just speak (it has to be about Israel because it was Israel independence day) on Israel in just the same way that a man rabbi would speak because I don't want them to see you as a woman rabbi who speaks about only women in Judaism subjects and that's kind of how I felt too so I was really glad to be invited to do that. Because at the beginning people said come speak about women and women's roles and women's roles in the Bible, you know I had my little note cards with my standard speeches about that because that's what everybody wanted to hear about, because we were helping to dispel all kinds of myths. But there was a certain point at which it's like all right, I'm just a rabbi treat me just like a rabbi, like any other rabbi. I experience all the stuff that the other early women rabbis experienced people saying oh I've never met a woman rabbi before or I've never kisses a rabbi before and what do they call a rabbi's husband. I have found very little of that in the last 10 years, oh the other day I had somebody say they had never met a woman rabbi. But I get very, very little of that any more because there are so many women rabbis out there and

they know one or somebody's heard of one or they've met one, or they've seen one in the paper so that's changed a lot. In the early part of my rabbinate, there was a conservative rabbi nearby a very old school conservation rabbi in Massachusetts who got very upset when I signed a *katuba*, how can you sign a *katuba*, women can't sign *katubot*. He was pretty liberal about other things but that kind of crossed the line for him. I had once or twice we don't want you to do this funeral for my uncle or my parents because I have a sibling who doesn't believe in women rabbis. I had opposite things I had Marge Piercy the feminist poet, writer, who, I was the only woman rabbi in New England, so back 30 years ago when she was getting married she called me up and said I want you to do the wedding because you're a woman rabbi. And I said to her I'm happy to meet with you and your husband, Ira, about doing the wedding and I'm thrilled that I would have a chance to do this but I don't want to be the Rabbi who does this because I'm a woman rabbi. I understand that you're making a statement with this but I want to be seen just as a rabbi. It was important to her to speak out against the patriarchal images in Judaism by having a woman rabbi but I preferred not to have that role. There were some people who were not so comfortable with a woman rabbi and over the years some people would articulate it. I remember I was in Keene, NH as the student rabbi and right before me David Ellison had been the student rabbi so he was hard to follow, and I remember someone saying that a couple of people up there on the committee when they found out they were going to get assigned a woman as their student rabbi from HUC said we don't want a woman but they didn't have any choice that was just the way the system worked and I was the next person on the list. And after I was there a few weeks one or two of them who had been the ones who didn't want a woman rabbi said you know the first couple of weeks we noticed you were a women but after that you were just the rabbi. So that was the kinds of conversations I'm sure you are hearing from some of the other people you're interviewing as well, the kinds of things that happened.

The WRN I was very active at the beginning of that and still am involved with the WRN, and at the beginning a lot of the conversations were about issues that women faced that are different from men so that we started out saying we just wanted to be treated the same way. We became very aware of course that we were not treated the same way whether it had to do with maternity leave, or it had to do with pay, or it had to do with clothing or what people would feel free to say to us that they wouldn't say to men. For the first ten years of my rabbinate I dealt with a lot of those issues, now though so much further away from it, the issues are much deeper, and much more hidden, I was always aware of them but now I take them much more seriously. Different leadership styles, things that congregants will say to a women rabbi in a negative way or think about a woman rabbi than they would do to a man, some of the symbolic exemplar stuff that works for male rabbis does not work for female rabbis. So there's a whole other dimension to this now. I was also involved in a share of the task force on women in the rabbinate back in the first few years of my rabbinate. We did a study of women's pay and discrepancies, on how women get to go from assistantships to other things and what women's goals were, we actually look at what women's own desires were in the rabbinate, and they seemed very different from the men's at the time. ...that women didn't want to be heads of big congregations they wanted to be more in congregations that would be smaller and they could be more in relationship. We always said that it would change over time that when they got more used to being in the rabbinate and it did, but it took a little longer than we thought. So we were aware of some of those issues, that being a woman could also affect your career path either because of

discrimination, people who didn't want to interview women or wanted to interview a token women so they could say they did but also the self-selection that women themselves were doing buying into unconscious stuff about women are better at relationship than at being a leader of a big system. Things have gotten better. Does that sort of answer that question. Sorry to ramble.

Emily Huebscher: How did gender affect liturgical choices and sermons

?Debra Hachen: Maybe though I think that the men in my generation or at least within a couple of years after me went through the same kind of stuff. They grew up when language was changing, we didn't use "he" anymore, and it's supposed to be gender free in language, but I think women were a little quicker to insist on making those changes because we understood it more. So gender affected things like when they wanted the *imahot* to be added in with the *avot* and felt more strongly about it; and I think the gender-free language for God was pretty much the same for the men and women that I went through school with. We all had sort of the same approach to that. I don't know about liturgical choices, I don't think that my feminism affected much of that except wanting to have the egalitarian language and being a proponent of that. I can't think of other liturgical choices that would be gender based. I think it's feminism in general in the sense of personal relationships and everything else that feminism stands for as it seeps through society I think it is one of the philosophies that was the foundation for things like Synagogue 2000, for changes in communal worship, emphasizing lowering *bimas* I think all that happened at the same time same, I think it's part of the same cultural movement that was attributed to feminism but I think feminism is one part of that same thing. I don't know, I don't really know what I think. Some of the things people might say like lowering *bimas*, people sitting in circles, facing each other in worship face to face is feminist but there were men who were doing that as well, so maybe feminist men were doing that, feminists just had a total effect on society to break down hierarchical boundaries hierarchical systems in that sense I guess I was influenced in my approach to liturgy by feminism but just in the way it was in the whole society... Sermons? I don't think gender really affected the way handled sermons. I don't think so. I think that other cultural forces about using personal examples and other things affected how I gave sermons but I don't think it was specifically because of feminism I wouldn't give sermons on women's issue I was also influenced by the whole civil right movement so when I gave sermons about the rights of minority groups or seeing things from another person's perspective, it didn't just come out of my experience as a woman it also came out of the way I was raised, about equality, people, whatever their difference were.

Emily Huebscher: How were liturgical changes perceived?

Debra Hachen: I didn't really give sermons about equality, I don't want you to misunderstand here, the in sounds like oh I'm going to speak about something like feminism, my sermons are mostly about personally relating text to one's life, about social action issues, my sermons aren't any different than sermons of my male colleagues, again, I believe they're not any different, we all give different kinds of sermons, but I think if you read through all my sermons and you read through some other man who grew up in the same generation, somebody else who's in my same circle of people I don't think you'd find a lot of differences in the sermons.

Emily Huebscher: Were they heard differently.

Debra Hachen: That's an Interesting question. I don't know the answer to that. I don't think so. I think my sermons were heard the same way if I had been a man or a

woman. I don't think people discounted what I said because I was a woman or certain people related more to my sermons because I was a woman. I think some of that may go on in counseling situations but I don't that.... Or I think that it used to go on in counseling situations at the beginning of my rabbinate. But people are so used to now men and women rabbis, gender issues are very subtle, they're not very overt, people are used to talking to women now and to women rabbis about their issues. So I don't think in sermons it was any different. So, liturgical stuff I think that people reacted to gender change but I don't think it had anything to do with my being a woman rabbi. I think if a male rabbi had stood up in front of my same congregation and gone through the ritual committee like I did and said alright we're going to start using the *avot* and *imahot* for the next six months, just to get used to the language, because it's so hard to change language because it's so memorized and we want to see if we can get comfortable with it before we make a decision if we're going to continue doing it because right now it's not just a philosophical issue, and people just don't like change and it feels strange. I think if a male rabbi had stood up and announced that at the ritual committee meeting or stood up and announced that at the congregational meeting he would have had the same reaction from my one congregant who stood up and said if you change that prayer, you're going to change the whole Torah what are you going to start doing taking parts out of the Torah, taking parts out of Jewish law. I think that person was going to react that way whether a man or a woman was in the pulpit. I say that because these things were going on all over the country. I think that the difference is that as a woman rabbi I might have backed down a little more or been more sensitive to working things through process, because people would say oh she's only doing that because she is a woman, that's the biggest issue. If every time we did something that was egalitarian, gender-free men could get away with it but we women were like oh is she only doing that because she's a woman? So I think that was really the biggest issue. It still is an issue today.

Here in Berman? County the rabbis are getting together and doing a Torah \_\_\_\_ night where each of the different \_\_\_\_, the reform and conservative rabbis. I look at the topics that three of the men rabbis were doing one is feisty women in the bible, another one is daughters of the bible, you know they're doing these women topics they can get away with; but if a woman teaches those I becomes like oh, she has a portfolio that she's a "woman" rabbi. So I still hesitate sometimes to teach those things when I have a choice of subjects, I will sometimes not do that, or like when I came to the congregation where I am now, I would have loved to have a *Rosh Chodesh* group right away but I felt that if I did that, after they had a man rabbi for all of those years even though they had a little *Rosh Chodesh* group the years before I came that lasted a little while, I thought oh that's going to brand me as a woman rabbi I need to wait a few years before I do that; so I still sort of self-select what I'm going to do out of that, not wanted to be branded as that's all she knows or that's her biggest issue.

Emily Huebscher: Did you end up starting a *Rosh Chodesh* group or introduce women's rituals?

Debra Hachen: I had a *Rosh Chodesh* group when I was in Massachusetts for a few years. women's rituals?... some are the same as men, going through divorce, going to *mikvah*, I'm not sure that's a woman's ritual. I did work in my early years on girl baby naming ceremonies so in my early rabbinate I really pushed hard for 8<sup>th</sup> day ceremonies that had to be exactly equal to what the boys had, and creating rituals about that, drawing on

different things and putting them together, working with people creating materials for that. So I did that early on, that was a big change in the 70s 80s that whole movement so I was part of all the women who were doing that. Eventually that became sort of a post-feminist thing, it doesn't have to be equal it can just be different. So in the 80s almost all the mom's I knew wanted to have 8<sup>th</sup> day ceremonies in my congregation, they understood, yeah, this is a statement that girls are equal to boys. By the middle of the 90s it was like we don't need to do that way any more we can do the girl naming ceremony 2 weeks later; things don't have to be the same as the boys, things don't have to be identical, they just have to have the same valence; so that sort of went on so. We had a *Rosh Chodesh* group for a while there; I do a lot of women's stuff, we had the whole women's Seder movement that was going on, I worked with a team of women in Boston a created some really huge communal Women's Seders up there, I had Women's Seder in my own congregation. We had a special women's evening Supper in the Succah, sort of women's spirituality discussions and groups. We did men's things too; we had a drumming group that was men and women together. But we did some special things that were just for women, we worked on women's spirituality and the idea that there's a certain amount of women's Jewish spiritual consciousness raising that goes on. We never did a women's retreat while I was up there but we did these other things, Supper in the Succah, things like that with our own spiritual readings or singing or our own rituals. I was involved in a Seder at an institution, at a JCC here in our area in New Jersey and helped to go in a lead it and I really liked those, so now we've started a *Rosh Chodesh* group this year finally at the synagogue, I decided it was time to do that and I got 30 women who all wanted to be together and do things once a month so there's a team of 2 people each month that volunteer for the next month to choose what the women are going to read from the Bible, and we do a little ritual together and its very nice. I think some of that depends on what's going on, if my sisterhood already had a spirituality component to it, I probably wouldn't be having a *Rosh Chodesh* group but they're mostly a fundraising group. So I kind of felt it needed to be done. And I'm very interested in their being men's groups happening as well, but I don't feel I can lead men's groups and it's a small congregation so there isn't a male clergy to do that so maybe the men's club will eventually go in that direction, I've given them the information on it.

Emily Huebscher: Making any other choices in your congregation based on gender?

Debra Hachen: You know, I don't know. I think the biggest ones were being careful not doing too much adult education topics in the beginning I did a lot but after that especially out in the community when I'm just sitting with other rabbis not being the only one speaking about women's issues not to be labeled as, well she'll speak about it, in the first ten years we had to do that we women it men weren't thinking about it I wasn't that kind of a feminist. I guess that was a decision within my rabbinate, but decisions about job or career what kinds of positions I would have. I didn't really I didn't go into an assistant that was about gender issues, but I don't know, my therapist would have to tell you that, whether I wanted to be a solo rabbi because I wanted to assert that women aren't second to a man. I don't really think there was any of that but who knows.

Emily Huebscher: Pressure unique as a pioneer

Debra Hachen: The women first 5-10 years of women rabbis we all had to be like extra good, extra smart, work really, really hard because what we did would reflect on if people were going to accept women rabbis so if one messed up people would say oh you see women rabbi can't cut it. So that was definitely the pressure in the first 4-5 years

especially when I was in New England in the beginning, before there were other women rabbis it was like people's whole view of whether a woman should be a rabbi would be determined partly by how you behaved. But you know I liked that part too, you had a lot of influence because you could really change people minds about things, you could really open up their minds. So there was that pressure and then there was the general pressure that women in the 80s had which was the whole balance of work-life and home-life which wasn't about balance it was like the super-mom, super-rabbi days before the whole idea of balance came in. The idea that you could do anything; you could show them how, how there's no limits, never wanting to say no, never wanting to say, well I have my family at home. But the men were behaving pretty much the same way too in the 80's, the workaholic kind of thing, that we can be there for our families and our congregations at the same time. Luckily that's gotten better.

Emily Huebscher: How have pressures change?

Debra Hachen: I think that the whole... there's a general sense among the next generation of men and women in the rabbinate that yes, we need our off time, we need our down time, we need our vacation time; it's ok to put our family first sometimes, to go home for dinner, we're not just a servant of the congregation. I think that a lot has changed but not just for women, but it's helped women too. At the beginning there was a lot of resentment of women who were... I don't want to say resentment but there was some tension between women who worked full time and women who decided to work part time while they were raising their children within the rabbinate. Those women who were part time or taking more time to raise their children were somehow letting down everyone else and there were some people who said oh, why are you working when you have children, why aren't you taking off. But we all understood that our career path would be really different and we felt an obligation to stay on the path I don't think that women have that pressure today, maybe they do for economic reasons. My experience in the last 15 years, I don't know where you are on this, but my experience is the last 15 years the women I run into, I never hear from any of the young women who are in their child-bearing years or who are going to be in it soon saying well you know I'm going to have to put off having children for this or that, I'm going to have to work doubly hard, they're all like, I'm going to find a job at ¾ time or I'm going to take a few years off or find a non-congregational thing that has different hours or I'm going to do counseling. The whole rabbinate is just so much more open today. Even just the pressure to be a congregational rabbi was so heavy in the 70s 80s we kept saying well, we just need to open up the idea about the communal rabbi and people can be a rabbi in other places, we kept giving it lip service and finally it came to be. I don't think it's perfect but it certainly has changed a lot. Part time rabbinate is not considered ½ a rabbinate any more. It's considered an ok career path, it may have economic consequences and it may be more difficult for those men and women who do part time to later on compete against people who have the experience of being full time for so many more years, but it certainly isn't frowned upon in the whole rabbinate or people don't look upon them as not being truly a rabbi which was what was happening in the early 80s. I think that's changed quite a bit. But I'm looking at it from my vantage point. Women who are going through it today oh, it was easier back then, your choices were more black and white.

Emily Huebscher: Change to rabbinate as a whole

Debra Hachen: The whole change in leadership style the worship style the rabbi coming down from the *hima*, the more communal worship finally in the 80 90 the

constant talk about how being in a E congregation or a D congregation is not the mark of that you're the best kind of rabbi there is, finally those things I think worked there way into the whole system. I know there still is something about rabbis who are in 1500 to 2000 or 3000 family congregations being mega rabbis and better rabbis it isn't automatic any more there's a lot of respect for rabbis in all different kinds of jobs and all different sizes and institutions. In 30 years I've seen a lot of changes in the rabbinate. I've seen changes liturgy and changes in people's loyalty to Reform Judaism, much less reform identity even from the rabbis going through rabbinic school, they're sort of seeing themselves as liberal rabbis many more of them there were people who didn't come from reform backgrounds but everybody, 90% of the people who were going through school right before me or after me, were committed reform Jews and now we're in this sort of post denominational thing so people go to reform rabbinic schools and they're going to serve reform congregation but they're not movement people some of them the same way, people who have come up through the camps and a lot of people come over from the conservative Jews and there's no right rabbinic school, it can be Reconstructionist, it can be reform, or any kind of non-Orthodoxy. So that's interesting I think that the whole reform rabbinate is being shaken up from the inside by some of that.

Emily Huebscher: What role women had in those changes?

Debra Hachen: I think the larger culture that included feminism had something to do with those changes but I don't think that specific women rabbis had a different role than the male rabbis, in the changing definition of what reform Judaism really is. I think women in the past 20 had a voice in the reform rabbinate, a voice like the men. And the more women rabbis there are, the more it gets to be 50-50, the more equal the voices. I think the CCAR I to some extent the URJ went out of its way to make sure there were women. Women got attention and got positions in the CCAR because they were women, if anything there was reverse discrimination against the men in order to prove women are involved. Joe Glazer would call me I want you to be on this committee or do this or do that and there were times I did know do they want me because of who I am or do they want a woman's name on the list nothing to do with women placement commission or did work on shortage of rabbi in the 90s but sometimes we women got to do all kinds of things, things men were jealous because maybe they were being asked to do it because they didn't want the committees to be all male Women contributed to where the reform movement is today, look at Elish Frishman editor of the prayer book, Janet Marder when she was president of the CCAR, all the first have been happening I don't think we had some special influence from some kind of woman's perspective.

Emily Huebscher: Next section on superficial elements, dress, speech, actions. Joy Levett who described two models in the rabbinate the navy blue suit goddess if this is a continuum where would you place yourself

Debra Hachen: I'm not sure what Joy is talking about I am sure, I understand what's she's saying. When I think of my women friends... On my computer my screen is a picture of about 25 women rabbis all in Israel on a women rabbis trip about 15 years ago and I'm looking at these rabbis and I'm thinking if I apply Joy's thing to them I mean blue suit rabbis or are they goddess rabbis?, she doesn't mean in the way they dress, does she?, she means what I was saying to you before whether you're a rabbi who is a woman or a you're a woman first. Is that what she's saying or you talking about dress?

Emily Huebscher: Whether we hide it so we look gender neutral or go totally

Debra Hachen: Well I guess I'm more like a blue suit when I'm on the pulpit but I don't like that way of putting it. The reason that I dress in a suit usually on the bima I believe its not looking like a man it about disappearing right now I'm wearing black pants and a colorful dress the appropriate clothes for the situation I'm not really wild about defining what fem is I don't wear sexually appealing clothes I don't think the goddess image I never wear pants on the bima I have a cantor who wears pants all the time I wear pants suits on the bima as well as regular suits I don't think it has to do with copying men if I was a lawyer I wouldn't be wear more conservation person I don't think dressing should be a statement whatever you have to wear a women's seder a colorful turquoise flowy jacket appropriate to the occasions. I do like the women at WRN conference if you were to line people up I would be a little more conservative not a scarf person flowing in the wind a little more conservatively.

Emily Huebscher: Do you face any challenges trying to create the superficial elements of your rabbinate. First trying to figure out what the female rabbi should look like with no role models.

Debra Hachen: Any challenges that I faced? I don't think so. Yes, but I always thought about what clothes I wore It's easier for a guy length of the skirt that kinds of stuff I always dressed conservatively anyway for me it wasn't much of an issue I never had people make comments If I was going out on my day off and I wanted to wear blue jeans I would and if I was going out to a party when I had opportunities to go place there was a certain image of what a professional looked like and I dressed that same way I didn't have to pull back

Emily Huebscher: Did you see other women who faced challenges.

Debra Hachen: I have no idea. I never really saw that I remember one time in the 80s bright red nail polish and I thought she's going to call so much attention to the fact that she' a woman and now a days it's not such a big deal I thought called attention to herself that she was a woman. I'll be interested to find out if there were women

Emily Huebscher: Comments on the ways that you looked

Debra Hachen: Men all the time, I've never kissed a rabbi before or that's a cute dress and they were the kinds of men who just are obnoxious who want to get a rise out of the rabbi or make her blush. I never had that.

Emily Huebscher: Picture of woman rabbi has changed.

Debra Hachen: In a visual sense? We were all the same age, now we're from 20 something and grey haired rabbis. Did someone say lets take a picture of everyone with grey hair. So they took a picture of all the grey haired women it was a statement we're not a bunch of fresh off the train in the big city for the first time. Like me and a little older who have been in the rabbinate 30 years women are not equivalent to young and just out of school, the first 30 or 40 women.

Emily Huebscher: Assumptions

Debra Hachen: I have no idea. By other people? I don't know how to answer that question.

Emily Huebscher: As a pioneer did you shape how future women would look, were you conscious of being a model.

Debra Hachen: Physically? No, I wasn't conscious of being a role model for how women would physically look.

Emily Huebscher: Your greatest success

Debra Hachen: As a rabbi who's a woman?

Emily Huebscher: Yes

Debra Hachen: The only stuff that's connected to women is that stuff from my first few years, helping to introduce to the greater Jewish community to the idea that when you picture a rabbi it didn't necessarily call up the picture of a male. Just by being a rabbi and working through those early pioneer years, we accomplished that. And it would be a positive image as well.

Emily Huebscher: In general your greatest success

Debra Hachen: I'm a congregational rabbi, I think my greatest success is on the personal level working with individual congregants on their own spiritual journeys or on a congregational level helping the congregation to vision and be looking toward the future and what it could do for its members and for Judaism.

I mean 30 years is so many different things. My greatest accomplishment is that I survived the 30 years and had an influence on systems and on individual people hopefully brought people a little closer to thinking themselves as spiritual and being about to talk about God and being able to see God as something in their lives. I don't think my answer would be different than a lot of men that I know. I don't think it's something I've written or anything like that. It's programs and teaching, a transitional things are things I like best in my rabbinate but which things happen are my biggest accomplishments....I don't really think it's for me to say. What they'll say at my eulogy one day, I don't know. Sometimes I joke and I say you know my biggest accomplishment was the homeless guy and he and his wife lived out of their car and I finally convinced them that they needed to move into an apartment and I got them their first and last month's rent and so that they stopped living in their car. I kind of have this spiritual idea that one day when I appear before God kind of like in one of those folk tales they'll be adding up all my good deeds and all my bad qualities and that's the one that will finally weight, that's the one that really counted, she got the homeless guy out of his car, the rest of it, eh, that was nice, but that was the one that really mattered. So I just have a spiritual view of things I'm not one to judge how to little fit into little pieces.

Emily Huebscher: How did being a woman facilitate your success?

Debra Hachen: I don't think of myself as a woman rabbi going thru as a pioneer in the early years I'm very grateful for opportunities that came my way as women in leadership a benefit that I had

Emily Huebscher: Greatest challenges to you

Debra Hachen: Overcoming financial discrimination, her husband works so why should she be paid the same amount cultural prejudices against women pay ceiling. Some people who at first glance didn't want to have a woman rabbi felt so unJewish at a funeral. Just did a funeral a few days ago his sibling said I know this woman so it's ok reform rabbis face ongoing one where women are perceived differently as symbolic exemplars as men are. When women act as a leader in a style that identify as men unfeminine clashes for lay leaders some women are good at finessing that issue that is the big issue today a lot of psychological stuff we can't just act in the same ways that men do but people will be projecting on us even worse from women congregants a really big challenge but women get it from leadership. Men can have almost any style but if women do it not warm improper men business like women get a double whammy on that

Emily Huebscher: Positive or negative?

Debra Hachen: Oh, positive absolutely it depends when I'm going thru a rough time I'm ready to go be a nursery school teacher but on the whole 85% positive and it's good to have some things that aren't so positive because it gives you room to grow I love working with bar/bat mitzvah kids on their *d'var torah* and feel very connected around times or funeral writing of eulogies writing bulletin articles leading worship most of the time depending on who I'm leading worship with pastoral part ceremony family education pretty much everything except writing long formal sermons but I don't have to do that very often.

Emily Huebscher: What made you succeed

Debra Hachen: Education and background I received in my own synagogue in my family camp, Nifty the personal example of my father as a rabbi. My own temperament I can switch gears from one thing to another quickly see my work as spiritual divine work part of something larger in the universe something holy as a calling. When I was 11 I felt somewhat called. The support of my husband his emotional support. My women peers and my male and women peers groups that I belong to that are supportive all those things help me be successful and a time in society that was ready to have women rabbis felt like a long time when we were in the pioneering time of it, here are the pioneers the ones from the first 5 or 10 years or whatever it is. It's a long time ago now, it's a different rabbinate.

Emily Huebscher: Advice

Debra Hachen: Work on your own spiritual life, have a real sense of God in your life, see your work as holy because sometimes it's going to seem very ordinary and very down in the mud and you have to keep in mind that you're doing God's work. Whatever way you think about God.

I don't think I have any specific advice for women as opposed to men except, Be very, very aware... Don't be fooled into thinking you're looking just like any other rabbi. That there are things projected onto women, just as there are individual things projected onto men because of their maleness, and it's foolish to say, I'll above that, I'm better than that, because it's going on underneath the surface even when you think it's not. And understand those things and learning about them from psychologists I think is really important. That's some of my advice. Go do something you enjoy doing and always be learning, go to conferences, go to new things, read about new ideas, try new things in the rabbinate, to educate yourself and have lots of role models. I had lots of role models, I didn't have women role models but I had lots of different models.

Emily Huebscher: Thank you so much.

Debra Hachen: I appreciate that you're doing this.

Emily Huebscher: Thank you.

**Interviewer:** Emily Huebscher, 5<sup>th</sup> year student HUC

**With:** Rabbi Leah Kroll, 1981

**Date:** February 17, 2010

Leah Kroll: At the airport-happy to help, glad somebody wants to hear what it was like for us. It was quite different in those times.

Emily Huebscher: Recording for the American Jewish Archives.

Leah Kroll: In 1971, I was working at camp swig in their Hebrew program and the director of the program said to me at one point you know Leah, you should think of becoming a rabbi (laughter) this was before Sally was ordained. And I looked at him and I said, it was like saying Leah, why don't you go to the moon. And I said, Jimmy, this is Rabbi Jim Kaufman who is retiring this year at Temple Hillel in North Hollywood, CA. I said, Jimmy, you haven't noticed their not any women who are rabbis. And he said I'm studying in Cincinnati with someone now, a woman who is going to be ordained next year. I said, really!?, women can become rabbis? So, all through college it was in the back of my mind, wow, I could become a rabbi!? At the beginning of the 70's when all of the stuff was beginning to happen in the feminist movement, it was a really radical idea. So it was in the back of mind as I started college and as I was finishing college I realized this was really a combination of all of the things that I was interested in, but I would never have known about it had somebody who I really respected and trusted not been studying with Sally Priesand?

Emily Huebscher: Feminist?

Leah Kroll: Absolutely, I define feminism as a movement that allows human beings to reach their potential in whatever field they want to explore even if the barriers have not been broken in that field.

I don't think my definition has changed, I've just learned over the course of my rabbinate, that it's harder to be a pioneer than I thought it would be. And then as numbers of women in the rabbinate became more critical, more numerous, it certainly became easier. I think that in beginning we always said to ourselves, it will take a generation and that's what it took, and so it's incredibly satisfying to have lived to have seen that happen. Of course, now I'm an Israeli citizen and the same it's not true in Israel, or it's not true yet hope not for reform Judaism or for women in the rabbinate but I hope that one day in a generation it will happen there too. It's just not a fight I'm interested in fighting; I've already done it once. I work as an educator in Israel, not as a rabbi.

Emily Huebscher: Liturgical choices, being a woman

Leah Kroll: I came to a congregation that was pretty traditional and I was always in inclusion meeting, and I came to very large congregation, 3000 family congregation and I was always voice of, "why aren't we including the *imahot* in *amedah* and why aren't we, when we meet with families after they give birth to a girl why aren't we encouraging them to do some kind of welcoming ceremony for girls. I was that voice so slowly over time the congregation changed and I didn't have to be the only one who was making that argument and the congregation totally changed its liturgy. So that was one thing. In terms of sermons, my sermons always took on a much more family-oriented.

personal kind of argument, I was in the same congregation 26 years although I worked as a rabbi and after some time as a rabbi-educator but that decision is something I want to talk about in how the women in the yearly years felt that we needed to make decisions based on what is good for women in the rabbinate rather than for us, but after a while my colleagues I think felt free to give similar types of sermons once I had broken the ground and they saw that congregants were really receptive to that. So for example, on the High Holidays, this was a congregation who celebrated two days of Rosh Hashanna, so on the first day of Rosh Hashanna we read the *akedah*, I was the one who always, always criticized and spoke from a mothers point of view and I would say year after year, each year a different way of *drashing* on it, I was the one who was able to get up there and say I don't understand what Abraham did and I don't really get how you can listen to a voice of God that tells you to sacrifice your son and people needed to hear that voice but nobody else was giving that voice. I was the only who chanted that *haftorah* \_\_\_\_\_ and every year gave a *drash* about that, and people used to cry during my *drash*, because I was the only one who had nursed a child so I spoke from a very different place than my colleagues did and then slowly they began to be able to speak from that place, which is really nice to be able to \_\_\_\_\_. But they needed somebody else to be able do it first.

Emily Huebscher: Role women had in changing the rabbinate?

Leah Kroll: When I was ordained and we actually heard this being said, it was we're investing \$100,000 or whatever the figure was at the time, and what we expect from you is to go into the congregational rabbinate because that's the only way you can be a real rabbi. If you choose Hillel or if you choose education or if you choose to work in chaplaincy, if you choose anything else, it's not worth our investment. And the pressure at the beginning to be congregational rabbi was huge and I think women gave a number of things to the rabbinate, one, is that there are many, many different ways of being a rabbi and be a good rabbi and do all of those different things, that's number one, and number two, you can be a good rabbi and care about your family and you can still care about your congregation or whatever it is that you are doing or what your job is, and you can care about your family at the same time. I think these are the things that women introduced into the rabbinate and I think it made all rabbis better. My father-in-law's a rabbi and I know that he never would have thought of doing some of the same things that I did because it just wasn't done a generation ago. I mean rabbis were supposed to be there and on call and there for their congregations 24 hours a day and the thought of ever taking time off to do something with your family, you just didn't do that; and I think women introduced the fact that of course you can. I'm not saying that in older generations, family wasn't important to them, but I think women introduced that and I think women also introduced a new model of success. Success used to be becoming the senior rabbi of an E congregation and women in the rabbinate showed that there are many ways of being a successful rabbi and it doesn't have to be being the senior rabbi of an E congregation.

Emily Huebscher: What do you think the measure of success is now?

Leah Kroll: I live in Israel now so I don't really know everything going on in the American rabbinate and then I just spent most of the last 20 years being the director of a day school. In touch with some of my friends what I hear from my friends, people who were ordained with me, colleagues, is that most of them measure success on life-style quality. I don't think that used to be the measure of success.

Emily Huebscher: Article Joy Levett navy-blue suit look same as a man or goddess who wanted to look opposite of a man.

Leah Kroll: Dress in a feminine dress with earring and that kind of stuff? It's very funny because... this is now February 2010, and my daughter is about to have her second child. In February 1979, I was a nursing mother of a 7<sup>th</sup> month old. There was no WRN then, there was no WRA, but a group of women, the anniversary was last weekend, last weekend was Presidents Weekend, a group of women went to Princeton NJ, I know because we got snowed in and I almost ran out of diapers for this child, the only child there because at the beginning we were not a child-friendly organization, we were an organization in forming. This was the pre-cursor of the WRN; so we met reconstruction women and reform women studying to be rabbis, at Princeton, for a weekend, trying to iron-out: could we have an organization together and if we were going to have an organization what were the issues that would be most critical to the women who were about to be ordained? So the women who were on the verge of being ordained then, Debbie Prinz, Karen Fox, Roz Greenstien, these are names I think you know, me, Mindy Portnoy, there may be about 15-18 of us who were at this weekend. Things we talked about at this weekend ranged from, how do we begin talking about maternity leave so we get congregations to take seriously hiring a woman, to what are we supposed to wear to a funeral or a wedding so that people take us seriously: the conversations that weekend were all over the place, but about things that nobody at HUC had ever talked about or thought about before. But we were going to be the people who were going to be on the front line and we needed to do this. Now I know that we've come a long way because two days ago I had lunch with the senior rabbi at my former congregation, Steven Wise, and he told me that they had finally hired another female rabbi since I left and she was pregnant really? And I said, you're kidding, really? He said, yeah, she starts in July and she's going to give birth in July. I didn't think I'd live long enough to hear that, that they were willing to hire her and she was going to have a baby right away; and I thought, wow, we have come a long way. So you asked me this question about at what do you wear, those were some of the early questions we used to talk about at school and \_\_\_\_\_ about over dinner, and that was one of the early questions that we talked about at that conference in February 1979. So, I never like to be type-cast; I was always me. I, personally, always did everything my way; and I was never a suit person. I like flowers and I like earring and nobody's going to tell me what I need to wear, so I did things my way. They don't any more, but for the first 20 years I was in the congregation, we wore robes at services; and I thought, oh, this is the best in the world because nobody looks at any of us in what we're wearing because we have these robes to cover us. They did away with them maybe 6-7 year ago, and they people saw everything that I was wearing; but for the first 20 years I loved the fact that we wore a robe because it was a non-issue. But, me personally, I would not have done that wear what a male rabbi wears because I wanted to be me. I didn't want anybody to de-sexize me.

Emily Huebscher: So, what are challenges you personally faced in deciding your fashion decisions?

Leah Kroll: I wanted to be modest. There were a number of occasions where there were men in the congregation who made advances, so I wanted to be both professional and modest but I wanted to be feminine. My favorite colors are pink and purple so I wanted to not be too frilly or too sexy or inappropriate but I wanted to be me. And I wanted to also be professional. So, at the beginning most of the clothes that were

professional were more suits or more dresses that had like a jacket so in the beginning I wore more dresses that had jackets; in the last 10 years fashion has changed, professional fashion has changed, like Talbots or Anne Klein and things, so women have had more choices to be professional but also in terms of color, have more choices. That kind of stuff made it easier. But when I interviewed for my first job we were told to buy suits, that I remember very clearly, by whoever at HUC who told us, I don't remember who it was, you all have to buy suits for your interviews. That's what we were told, and I was too young to know any better, so I wore a suit. But when I got to my job, which was in California. California anything goes, for me, that was helpful because I could do what I wanted. So I wore colorful skirts and blouses and I got to be me. In California you get to be you. Those weren't the issues; fashion was not the issue that was most important. What I remember is that fashion wasn't the issue, what I remember was we felt that if we screwed up on anything then that would be the death knell of women in the rabbinate. So what I remember was huge pressure to perform, and to be... so any rabbi felt you were only as good as your last sermon, *lai le chat a le chamal*, we felt that. If we weren't 100%... I remember my colleagues saying, oh wow, Leah you are always 100% ready, you prepared for everything and I wanted to say well, guys, there's a reason why I'm prepared for everything. I think that for the first 7-8 years after I was ordained I, and in talking to friends of mine I know that they felt the same way, that if we screwed up publically they would say see, women can't be rabbis. What I really love... I was hired as a Rabbi-Educator at the congregation where I was for 26 years and I realized very early that I loved the education part more than I loved being a pulpit rabbi but I felt that the message that I got coming out of HUC. What I really wanted to do was to just be the educator full time, and I felt that I couldn't do that because the message I got so clearly was that no-no-no-no-no, real rabbis are pulpit rabbis and we invested so much money in you and you can't go over to the education side because see that's what women do and that's not what rabbis do. And it took me 7 years to be able to feel that I can make the decision that's right for Leah; and there are starting to be critical numbers of us, and I can do what's right for me and I don't have to think any more what's right for women in the rabbinate. Those were the pressures that we felt in the beginning much more than the fashion ones.

Emily Huebscher: How do you think the.... What assumptions were made about you as a female rabbi?

Leah Kroll: By whom? By HUC? By my congregation? By...? There were a lot of people who were not prepared for us. If there had been a term, sexual harassment, around in 1975 when I started rabbinic school, there would be people on the faculty of HUC who would no longer be teaching. We were sexually harassed; we had a Mishnah/Talmud teacher, do you know what *muchad aish* is?

Emily Huebscher: No.

Leah Kroll: It's a technical term in the Mishna which means breaking the hymen. So we had this Mishnah/Talmud teacher who used to stand over us, over the women, and he would literally stand next to us in a scary, intimidating way, he would stand over us and he would make us translate *dafka* those passages, he used to do all kinds of horrible, horrible things to the women. There were other professors too... They weren't ready for us. They were so unready that the first building in New York before they moved to the Brookdale Center had only 1 bathroom for women, and everything else was for men. ...all kinds of little things. But my classmates weren't ready, when moved to LA I was only woman in my class and I

remember when we came back from Israel we all had to lead *tiflah* I remember one of my classmates I went to put on my *tallit* and I heard him say in like the largest stage whisper you've ever heard, I heard him say, oh my God she wears a *tallit* too? So our teachers weren't ready for us, our classmates weren't totally ready for us, and then when we were ordained the way Steven Wise assigned rabbis to do bar and bat mitzvahs, we were randomly assigned if someone didn't request us, and then I used to hear all the time oh, you can't do my child's bar mitzvah, my grandfather, uncle once used to be orthodox. We can't have a woman. Those things used to happen at the beginning. Because I remember I used to work with the schools, and in the beginning I was working with the nursery school, the elementary school and the middle school, and I was working with the nursery school kids and I remember the senior rabbi who was my father-in-law, the teachers told me that one day he was in the nursery school and the kids said to one of the teachers, who's that man, and the kids said, oh, he's the rabbi, and one of the kids said, no-no-no, he can't be, the rabbi's a woman, and I thought, ah, if only one day all kids would be able to say that. And several of my students in those days, women, eventually became rabbis and I know rabbis in several prominent places throughout the country. We knew it would take a generation. So, when you say, What were the expectations? I don't know what the expectations were I just think they weren't ready for us. And then there were the rumors that turned out to be substantiated, of this professor sleeping with this female student, and this one was this... things that were pretty unethical. So, we, in the early days, all of the women knew one another, not like now, there weren't so many of us, we all knew each other. So we would meet in the bathroom, in the woman's bathroom once we moved in NY to the Brookdale Center, we would talk in the bathroom which was the only place where we could be alone, and we would hear thing that we couldn't talk about because we feared that if we talked about them, we wouldn't be ordained. And then at the beginning, you know that when you're a student and you need to make money, we would all make money because the hottest topic at the time was like Women in Judaism, Feminism in Judaism, so we all used to get these speaking engagement and that paid part of our way through rabbinic school. But when I made *aliyah*, I dumped file after file after file, I didn't move any of it with me. But that paid part of my way through rabbinic school, all of those speaking gigs, and sisterhood, sisterhood had several conferences that we were all invited to, like Feminism in Judaism, those were like the hot topics in the mid- to late- 70's, and the very beginning of the 80's. I don't think anybody talks about it now. But it was hot. I don't know what anybody expected. They expected us to be good girls and keep our mouths shut and none of us did, or few of us did. We were not all alike, and I don't think they knew what to do with that. Just like men were not all alike, we were not all alike.

Emily Huebscher: Greatest success

Leah Kroll: I worked as a day school educator for the greater part of 25 years and I was also a social-action rabbi. I think my greatest success.... And I was a very creative programmer. I got kids to love learning Jewish texts and I also did cross-departmental programming. I got science teachers and math teachers and humanities teachers to work with Jewish study teachers on amazing, amazing programs. And I got kids to believe that they could make a difference, won a Fame Award for social action programs that involved 100's of children over the years doing amazing things. I think that was my great contribution. It was as a rabbi-educator. And I got kids to care. I got kids to care about being Jewish. I think that was my greatest contribution. I always believed that change was

possible. I saw it happen in my lifetime. But I got kids to believe that they mattered and that Judaism could matter to them.

Emily Huebscher: What about you made you able to succeed as a pioneer?

Leah Kroll: My father always told me I could do anything that I wanted to so I had a parent who always believed in me and I had a husband that always believed in me and I always believed in me. I think coming of age in the late 60's in a generation fighting for civil rights and fighting against the Vietnam War we were a generation who felt like we could do anything because we felt we achieved all these rights, we got abortion legal and we got a war that we thought was immoral we got it stopped. There was a great energy, in the early-, mid-, and late 70's; I think all of this helped, this energy. I grew up in a family who taught me I could be anything and do anything I wanted to do. So I had that support from an early age. I don't think I could have done it without the friends I made in rabbinic school. I think we were really close and we were a constant support for one another. And whenever we all had those horrible, horrible people who said terrible, prejudicial things to us, there was always someone I could call and I knew had had the same experience and could talk me through it. I never felt that I was alone. Even though I was on the front line, I felt there were other warriors with me.

Emily Huebscher: Advice

Leah Kroll: Know your priorities, always make time for yourself because it's easy to get lost in meeting other people's needs and if you don't take care of yourself, nobody else will. Make time to study and to grow spiritually because you give so much of yourself to other people that if you let them, they'll take every piece of you away. Don't ever stop fighting for what you believe is right. Don't forget why you wanted to become a rabbi in the first place. Because it can wear you down and you can become cynical and burnt-out so whether it's going to a spiritual institute or whether it's going to a learning place like the Hartman Institute or going to Israel or whatever it is, make time for yourself. I think you chose a good profession.

**Interviewer: Emily Huebscher, 5<sup>th</sup> year student HUC**

**With: Rabbi Ellen Jay Lewis**

**Date: February 9, 2010**

Ellen Jay Lewis: I was a junior in college I had been premed I had to declare a major I went in to see the dean who been raised in China by parents who were Christian missionary I know what you should do with your life pulled a HUC book from his shelf and said you should be a rabbi.

Emily Huebscher: Feminism and femininity

Ellen Jay Lewis: I do consider my self a fem and I think fem at base is about the quality of all human beings but the particular way that I understood it is that women should have opportunity equal to men.

Emily Huebscher: Role being a woman played in rabbinate?

Ellen Jay Lewis: I can probably answer that, any specific

Emily Huebscher: No in general

Ellen Jay Lewis: I think it's play a large roll being a woman in the rabbinate is different from being a man in the rabbinate. In the beginning it was huge because everything we did under a microscope at the college when I was there, I went to Cincinnati, Lowell McLoy who was a wonderful, wonderful man heard that the faculty complaining the women weren't speaking loudly enough and didn't know how to hold to torah I remember talking to him afterwards with more bravado than I should have had no one criticize me for not talking loudly enough and I didn't really think it was helpful thinking this was a problem for all the women maybe one or two women didn't speak loudly enough shouldn't have been generalized that way and he was terrific but not an unusual part of our experience there was a lot of stuff about , the women this and the women that including the fact that the women we kind of wore including that women had a hard time finding out where to go to the bathroom being a woman was very present. From the very beginning being a woman was very present.

So it played a role in being hired has always played a role in being hired I think once you're hired it plays a role in how people look at you I am also a psychoanalyst view rabbis transference operates when you're a woman in the rabbinate I think that from the perspective from somebody who was a mother in the rabbinate that my view of being a woman was very intertwined with the importance of being a mother all the way through in term of choice I made I can't think of anything that wasn't impacted by gender.

Emily Huebscher: Liturgical sermon

Ellen Jay Lewis: Sermons from the very beginning, people wanted to know what is it like to be a female rabbi a lot of those kinds of sermons. Liturgical choices I also think that the women who were ordained when I was ordained were all fairly conservative and we understood it was going to look different even if it wasn't I was ordained in 1980 I don't think I changed gender in the prayer book right then I don't think I started to do that until 1985-86 I was somewhat cautious not wanting to be perceived as a rabbi only for the women the way I interpreted text really explicit that comes to mind the liturgical choices as time went on were more influenced I think by my notion of fem than early on I don't know if that makes me very different from the men or not

Emily Huebscher: Women's rituals

Ellen Jay Lewis: In the mid 70s baby-namings for girls was a big thing. I remember designing a bunch of different kinds of rituals for naming of girls. Did I do any other? I don't think it did. I didn't do... no. Do you have particular rituals in mind when you asked the question.

Emily Huebscher: Some people have mentioned things like women's seder

Ellen Jay Lewis: No I never did that, I've been to one or two but not ones that I initiated.

Emily Huebscher: Any other choices in your rabbinate based on your gender?

Ellen Jay Lewis: I'm sure there were many. Many choices based on my notion of what it meant to me to be a mother. There are probably men who made choices based on what it meant to be a father as well. In the early days when the CCAR was becoming aware that they were ordaining women, invite us to be on committees so few we got recycled through at some point that I was trying to do what I could do but it was more important to me to be available to my family than to put in my time to be on a CCAR committee but that was not the most important part of my rabbinate to me and I had no ambition in that area my first job was as an assistant and then an associate in Dallas I was one of three rabbis. Running the school which I was totally unqualified for if I'm running a school I can't have full rabbinic responsibilities so we had an agreement that the first couple of years I was not on call and that was very purposefully from me that if I was going to work fulltime I already had a baby and I was prepare to work a certain number of hours a week. People got to know me and wanted me to do things people to run the school always tried to get a lid on my hours. My kids are now 27 and 30, which means they are probably your age. They seemed to have survived when I got to my solo position where I was for 8 years I consolidated the meeting time so all meetings were on Monday nights cause I didn't want to be out many evening during the week. The male rabbi who followed me undid that which was his problem. Gender related but important to me as a mother I used to schedule because I had a lot of *b'nai mitzvah* my rehearsal time with those kids based on what my kids' sports schedule was but I never told anybody I did that and that's a different between men and women in my generation. I might not be available on a 5 o'clock on a Wednesday but I wouldn't announce that I wanted to go to my son's basketball game, a rabbi stood up if its 3 o'clock and it's raining, I promised my son if it were raining I'd pick up my son at school and I remember thinking I would never say I would c all the coaches and they laughed at me they would tell me and I would schedule all my *b'nai mitzvah* rehearsals around that schedule so I could do my work at the temple but I could go to what I wanted to. The pulpit now I have a full time therapy schedule. My feeling about my family.

Emily Huebscher: What pressures were unique to you as a pioneer?

Ellen Jay Lewis: Whatever one woman did was generalized to be: this is what all women do so we felt very responsible for the future of women in the rabbinate altogether interviewed for a congregation while she was pregnant but didn't tell them she was pregnant until after they had hired her and the result of us were appalled that she would do that see, don't hire a woman because she's just gonna have a baby. We felt very responsible the faculty was really pretty terrific mostly we were really good students and that was all they cared about. Pressures, ok I think that we didn't get much in the way of national support so that for instance when I wanted to have a second child this was in the early 80's listen I want to do this the right way I'd like to negotiate a maternity leave, because in my first contract when I asked about that the placement some don't even bother, you won't get hired

told not to ask for in an initial contract, get the congregation to love you first and then you can ask for maternity leave. I want to have a maternity leave in my contract. Have your baby in June, which was kind of the way he talked, he was only a little bit joking. That was his advice. They had no... even though we in the early women's groups trying to get the CCAR to back us up in a maternity leave policy, male colleagues put out that we may get a leave that they never got so that was kind of difficult so I went to a lay person and I said to her listen, I want to negotiate a maternity leave before I get pregnant we're not going to get any national help we don't care what they say nationally, if it's right we'll do it and so I was able to negotiate a 3 month maternity leave for my second child. They may have thought they were helping but we were out there on our own, the positive of that was that we learned how to turn to each other. Just about everything was pressure if I think about it.

Emily Huebscher: How have pressures changed?

Ellen Jay Lewis: I'm not sure that they have. I think In some ways we've had a lot of women go through that have had to negotiate maternity leave there's still not real good national support in the CCAR wants to be helpful and that part's different that has changed. Cause now the people who run the CCAR are all my colleagues. Women have changed the rabbinate in some ways so for instance, there was no such thing as part time rabbi work women really created the notion of job sharing, of part time work, of alternative types of economically that has been to our disadvantage women are still paid less than men, I'm sure you know that critical mass of women and we do have the WRN, our own lobbying body the CCAR is very integrated when it comes to women it is no longer an old boys network the convention programming has been headed by women so and a lot more women there's a lot more being able to say well my friend did it this way so I could do it this way, the experience has been helpful the pressure to be a woman and do it all is there I don't think that congregations have structurally been able to realize that rabbis can work a more livable schedule There's a period Rather than try to do the schedule differently. There are some people who have made changes that way.

Janet Marder terrific, has created a whole different way of operating congregational which isn't to say she probably doesn't work too hard, where everybody gets a little time off larger congregations do to make the rabbinate more livable. But I think there's something deceptive for women in school

Because I think there's a lot of equality in admissions and there's a lot of equality as a student in the field women rabbis are still perceived differently from men in a variety of ways and it's kind of a shock, we kind of knew it, but years ago I just wrote an article for a CCAR journal about this, one rabbi said to another what do you pay your female rabbi. I think there was Much less self consciousness about being discriminatory, when I went through interviewing in 1980 for an assistantship not PC the things these guys said to me I'd hate to call you in the middle of the night and ask you to leave your baby, how often do you get called in the middle of the night I've been a rabbi for 30 years and I've never been called in the middle of the night, I'd say the same thing to a blind student. I thought it was unbelievable at the time, my older son was 3 months old when I started to interview and believe me this was not looked upon as a positive. The cong female family with a family maybe that has changed. I should be more optimistic I thinks its still hard out there; there are other people to talk to but I don't think there's complete equality.

Emily Huebscher: Salary published?

Ellen Jay Lewis: Conservative movement has something. The reform movement I'm trying to remember if there's anything actually in writing? There used to be a committee on women in the rabbinate I don't know if it still exists that committee, somebody like Roz Gold Debbie Prinz are the people who chaired that committee, they might know.

Emily Huebscher: Were you conscious of changes in the rabbinate as a whole by the presence of women in it?

Ellen Jay Lewis: New options, part time. I think women over the years have had huge impact on liturgy have had women in the lead when it came to changing. Debbie Prinz has great stories. I remember when she took an assistantship under Shelly \_\_\_\_\_ in New York ordained two years ahead of me Shelley changed the language in the first service that Debbie led she got up and did exactly what he did and a congregant came up and said she you hired a woman and the first thing she did was change the prayer group. We were perceived differently even if we didn't do something different. Woman have had an impact there too in terms of the structure of the rabbinate I worry a little bit because I think what's happened with a bunch of women is they say to the congregation part time assistants lets make the job  $\frac{3}{4}$   $\frac{1}{2}$  they're working just as hard but they're paid half and that's been a concern all the way through

Recording Interrupted

**Interviewer: Emily Huebscher, 5<sup>th</sup> year student HUC**

**With: Rabbi Janet Ross Marder, 1979**

**Date: February 2, 2010**

Emily Huebscher: Hi.

Janet Marder: Hi.

Emily Huebscher: How are you?

Janet Marder: I'm okay, thank you.

Emily Huebscher: Good, I'm doing well. I am excited to be visiting your congregation soon, this week.

Janet Marder: Yeah, we are looking forward to welcoming you.

Emily Huebscher: So, I have questions about your experience in the rabbinate. And so I wanted to start with when did you first think about becoming a rabbi?

Janet Marder: I decided that I wanted to go to rabbinical school when I was a senior in college, right after the Yom Kippur War, the October '73 war

Emily Huebscher: I have different sections that I am looking at in my thesis. I have read your article on how women are changing the rabbinate and so some of my questions deal with that issue. First I want to ask if you consider yourself a feminist and how you define feminism.

Janet Marder: I do consider myself a feminist. I define it as meaning equal choices for males and females, equal opportunities for males and females in our society, and the right to pursue the careers and the lives that we find fulfilling.

Emily Huebscher: Has that definition changed throughout your experience in the rabbinate?

Janet Marder: No, I don't think so.

Emily Huebscher: Can you identify what you think the role that being a woman has played in your rabbinate?

Janet Marder: That is a tough question because I have never been anything but a woman. From my earliest years in the rabbinate and even as a student I was asked this question - what is it like to be a woman rabbi - and I could never really answer because I only know what it is like to be me. I think, I sense that people sometimes respond differently to women rabbis than they do to men. I think that they find them sometimes more accessible figures, less threatening and intimidating. Though even that is not a perhaps a fair generalization because there are some very accessible, warm, not intimidating male rabbis and there are some women who are more forbidding in their demeanor too. On the whole, I think maybe women respond a little bit differently. I think some women find it a little easier to talk to a woman rabbi about some issues.

Emily Huebscher: Did your gender affect your liturgical choices or sermons?

Janet Marder: Did my gender affect...My gender affects. you know, probably the person I am and how I think and see the world. I have kind of mixed feelings about gender neutral language in liturgy actually. I happen to think some gender neutral language is sort of bloodless and abstract and not particularly compelling as worship language, so I am not personally opposed to male and female God language. Although my experience with most Jews is that they are uncomfortable with those languages so our prayer book, the prayer

book that we created here, does have gender -neutral language. It is certainly something I think about...maybe my gender means that I think about it a lot.

Emily Huebscher: How about your sermon topics?

Janet Marder: You know, I've talked, given sermons about rape and sexual assault and domestic violence, and I give a lot of relationally oriented sermons. I've also talked about other kinds of issues. I spoke about healthcare reform last week. So I think that probably to some extent my gender has affected my sermon topics.

Emily Huebscher: Have you introduced any women's rituals in your rabbinate?

Janet Marder: Let's see. I've done rituals with people, with women who have acknowledged their infertility and the end of their quest to have a child, and I've done rituals with women who are divorcing or ending their marriage. And certainly with women who have lost children but I've also done a ritual with a father who is still mourning for a child who died decades before. So yes, I have been involved in creating some women's rituals, but not just women's rituals. You know, I am involved in a women's seder here that has been happening before I got here. There is a Rosh Chodesh group that I have done programs with but that was here before I got here. My predecessor was a man and there was already women's programming going on.

Emily Huebscher: How do you feel that those liturgical choices, sermons, and rituals are received by your congregants?

Janet Marder: Oh, I think they have been received well. I think one of our challenges here is finding creative ways to engage men in the life of the congregation. Women are...I wouldn't say it is a crisis here, there are many men involved in the leadership here at Beth Am, but in terms of the worship life here at the congregation probably women are more engaged.

Emily Huebscher: Were you conscious of making any other choices in your rabbinate based on your gender?

Janet Marder: Again, I didn't think of it so much as based on my gender but based on who I am and my values and my priorities. I have never said because I am a woman I should do 'x'. So you know, gender probably has an impact on who I am but I didn't in a conscious way say because I am a woman I should do this. I thought to myself what kind of rabbinate do I want to have. I want it to be a rabbinate that addresses human needs in a compelling way.

Emily Huebscher: What pressures were unique to you as a pioneer?

Janet Marder: Well, one was that an awful lot was riding on every sermon or lesson or program that I gave because I was representing all women. So that, you know, it is difficult for anybody who is representing not only themselves but impressions of what a woman rabbi is. That is a lot of responsibility. The first women rabbis were constantly being invited to speak and teach and there was just a lot of extra responsibility to educate the community to this new phenomenon. There were congregations, one of my student pulpits actually, that after they had me for two years and were assigned another women rabbi said to the school "we did our experiment now give us one of the regular students". That was hard for my successor. We were looked at as abnormal initially. When I was a student at my first pulpit, and I had good pulpit experiences in all of the places I worked, but my first pulpit when they wrote an article about me to introduce me to the congregation it began with a rather detailed physical description of me which I don't think would have been the case if I was a guy.

Emily Huebscher: How do you think that those pressures have changed?

Janet Marder: Well, in my experience, we have two other women who work here with me plus a male. People no longer react as if you are an anomaly. They kind of take for granted that in this community women can be rabbis and religious leaders and we are seen as individuals and the whole gender is not judged on their actions. I think if anything there is some talk about are there still men going into the field so we can have some gender balance amongst our religious leadership. So that has changed a lot actually. I think there might still be some less confidence among women in negotiating their contracts, and a sense of maybe a concern that they don't have as much business savvy. I don't know if that is necessarily the case, but perhaps a feeling that they don't have as much.

Emily Huebscher: I know you wrote about this in your article, but how would you describe the changing rabbinate with the emergence of women in it?

Janet Marder: Well I think it probably cuts across gender lines right now, but it could be that I think the presence of women has had some influence on it. I think it is much less common now the feeling that the rabbinate should be an all-consuming way of life that denies you time with family and a private life. I think that my predecessor, not my immediate predecessor but the one before that who passed away recently, basically wasn't ever with his family, and gave that up to his vocation. I think that that is an uncommon vision of the rabbinate now.

Emily Huebscher: What role do you think that women had in the changing of the rabbinate?

Janet Marder: Well, as I suggested I think that it could be that the presence of women caused all women to think more about nurturing relationships and making room for a private life, a spiritual life, and a family life. It perhaps wasn't healthy for rabbis to lead lives that were some completely devoted to others and ignoring their own well-being.

Emily Huebscher: My next section is on the superficial images of the rabbi. So I want to start with a reference to an article by Joy Levitt who described two models for women in the rabbinate: the navy blue suit rabbi who saw herself as equal to a man in all ways and then the goddess rabbi who saw herself as the opposite to a male rabbi in all ways. If that is a continuum could you place yourself on it?

Janet Marder: I tend to wear the blue suit type of clothing mostly because I think that all rabbis, I am more comfortable when people are not making comments about my clothing. I want them to focus on what I am saying and teaching and not on what I am wearing so much so I try to look neat and otherwise not conspicuous. Otherwise I don't think women are inherently superior to men in the rabbinate or in any other way except that we are not likely to commit crimes of sexual assault. So I guess I am more toward the end of seeing women rabbis as equally entitled to respect and honor and equally endowed with gifts to share with others in this role.

Emily Huebscher: What challenges do you face when creating the superficial aspects of your rabbinic image?

Janet Marder: One more thought about the first question. Having said that, I don't think that I consciously try to model myself on male rabbis either. I think I am very different in my style in every way from my male predecessor so I don't think that I try to fit myself into a male model. I try to do things my own way but I don't think that women are somehow super-endowed with love, compassion, skill, eloquence, or other qualities that place us higher on the spectrum than men. So what sort of challenges did I face in trying to, how did you put that?

Emily Huebscher: To create your superficial rabbinic image, how a rabbi looks.

Janet Marder: You know, that was a challenge for me at first.. When I was ordained I was just one month past my 25th birthday, young for my age and just 5'2" with a quiet voice. I didn't look like anybody's image of a rabbi at that point. I had to develop the ability to communicate in a powerful way, which I don't do by yelling, but any young professional has to figure out a way of feeling comfortable with who you are and developing relationships with people and establishing yourself so I think that I had all of those normal challenges but I had a few extra ones because I was a woman and because of how I looked.

Emily Huebscher: Did you find yourself looking to take cues from professional women or rabbinical men when deciding what to wear, how to act, or how to speak?

Janet Marder: There were just so few women who were already out there. I remember having a session with Laura Geller when I was at school, I was at the LA school for a couple of years before going to New York, and Laura had just become the Hillel rabbi at USC which is right across the street from HUC. She came over and had a meeting with us, there were two women in our class at the point, and I remember like paying some attention to what she was wearing, I can still remember what she was wearing actually, because I was curious about how a woman rabbi dressed. But she was it. I never knew another woman rabbi, really ever, until I was ordained. I was among the first ten. Along the way I sort of had to figure a lot of this out for myself. I read some of those dress for success books.

Emily Huebscher: What conclusions did you come to?

Janet Marder: Well, kind of the ones I said. I want to look neat and professional. I don't recommend this for anyone else but I wanted to dress in a way that didn't draw attention to my clothing. I wanted the attention focused on what I had to say and do. I tend to avoid, but this is just my style, I didn't have to reign myself in. I tend not to want to be wearing clothing that is distracting and if I were a lawyer or a doctor or a waitress I would dress the same way in a non-distracting way.

Emily Huebscher: Do you have any stories about people commenting on the way you look?

Janet Marder: Yeah, I think they comment on my clothing, probably less now, but more than they would to a man. I often get comments on what I am wearing, always positive. If I have a new suit or something people notice it.

Emily Huebscher: Anything inappropriate?

Janet Marder: Not so much. I mean, when I was younger I used to get a lot of comments from men about if only rabbis looked like that when I was young I would have gone to shul more often, that kind of thing. It didn't upset me. I haven't actually had upsetting experiences of that kind. I noticed that the younger women on my staff right now, I am very alert to watching whether people are treating them in an inappropriate way. Every now and then it happens, and I try to help them figure out how to handle it, but I don't get the sense that it is a very common occurrence.

Emily Huebscher: How do you feel that the picture of the female rabbi has changed over the course of your rabbinate?

Janet Marder: Well I think people have begun to see women rabbis more as individuals because there are so many of us, and much more within the norm. And there is a greater comfort level, though this is not across the board. We have a lot of Russians at Beth Am, Russian émigrés, they are somewhat less comfortable with women, so there are still sort of pockets of resistance. Every now and then, very rare, but every now and then a bar mitzvah will come up and the family will say we have some traditional relatives, will you assign a man to this one.

Emily Huebscher: Do you honor those requests?

Janet Marder: I usually do because they are exceedingly rare. There have been two of them in the last eleven years and I don't want the woman rabbis to be made miserable by it. It don't want her to be put in a position where she will be made to feel bad.

Emily Huebscher: What assumptions were made by you as a female rabbi?

Janet Marder: Well, I got asked, here's a good example, when I had to come before the whole congregation to be voted in as the senior rabbi. It is a large congregation, there were probably close to a thousand people there, and I had to stand up in front of the meeting and answer a lot of questions and at the end they voted. One of the questions they asked me was how I would balance my rabbinic career with my family responsibilities. I had two kids at that point who were 13 and 16. I suspect that that question wouldn't have been asked of me if I was a man. I didn't get upset about it, I answered the question and made a joke about it, got a big laugh, and people still tell me about how they remember it.

Emily Huebscher: What was the joke?

Janet Marder: I said something about how they were teenagers and they didn't want me around that much anyway, and so the moment past smoothly and it turned out not to be an issue, but I remember noticing it and I don't think that question would have been asked if I had been a man. I think that there were some salary issues when I first came in and I think I was paid less. They would deny that, but I think that I was paid less. I was certainly paid less than my predecessor, and I think it had less to do with being a woman and more to do with the fact that I came from a non-congregational position, which as you know are paid significantly less than congregational positions, but it might have been gender related. I am not paid less now and it is something that I had to address. Men find it difficult to work for a woman so I think that I've had some staff related issues that I wouldn't have had if I were male.

Emily Huebscher: As a pioneer rabbi, do you feel like you were part of the group that shaped the image of the future female rabbi?

Janet Marder: Yeah, I think we probably were. We were all very different, all of those who were in my class, very different career choices. One of the kind of sad things that emerged when I wrote that article – I went back and sort of looked up, checked on everyone who had been in my class and the vast majority were not in congregational life. Of course I was not in congregational life for about 10 or 11 years either while my children were growing up.

Emily Huebscher: In what ways do you feel like you shaped it?

Janet Marder: I hope we kind of helped make the world safe for women rabbis, helped, you know, educate a congregation to find women rabbis acceptable, desirable role models as rabbis and teachers. I think that we paved the way for many more women to pursue this work, which for me has been very fulfilling.

Emily Huebscher: My last section is on the professional realities of the woman rabbi, and I'm wondering what you feel was your greatest success as a rabbi?

Janet Marder: Well, it may sound funny but one of the things I feel best about is Torah study, that there is a very large number of people with whom I get to study Torah every week. They take it seriously and value it and I partly like that I have managed to help them get engaged with Torah study and partly that they are observing Shabbat, that they come on Saturday morning and that it is a day set apart from them. I guess not related to my gender

particularly. Becoming president of the CCAR, I don't think of as an achievement, I didn't do anything to earn it, I was invited to do it and I did it, but I don't feel like I, you know, you feel, you value accomplishments that you worked toward in some fashion.

Emily Huebscher: What are the ways in which you feel being a woman facilitated your success?

Janet Marder: That is hard for me to know, because I wouldn't be the same person if I wasn't a woman, so it is impossible for me to speculate on how things might have been different if I hadn't been one.

Emily Huebscher: How about the challenges you faced as a female rabbi?

Janet Marder: I tell you, the things that keep me up at night, the challenges I worry about, have nothing to do with being a woman, they really don't.

Emily Huebscher: What are those?

Janet Marder: I worry about how to gauge people and retain people and draw them closer to torah, and keep kids studying beyond bar or bat mitzvah and issue like that, and also internal issues dealing with our staff and those kinds of things. I don't think they are particularly linked to questions of gender. I would be surprised if they were significantly different than those that keep male rabbis of congregations similar to mine up at night.

Emily Huebscher: Would you consider your experience in the rabbinate more positive or negative overall?

Janet Marder: Oh, positive.

Emily Huebscher: Why?

Janet Marder: I feel very blessed that I do work that I think is meaningful and has a positive impact and allows me to have a lot of variety and creativity and freedom in the work that I do. It is emotionally and intellectually rewarding which is what I primarily hoped for when I went into this work. I have also been able to make a decent living. I have two daughters, and I think that when they look at the world they feel like it is a choice between doing work that is positive and meaningful and work that earns a fairly decent income. I don't think they see a lot of opportunities that might offer both.

Emily Huebscher: What aspect of the rabbinate do you enjoy the most?

Janet Marder: Writing and teaching. Did you only want one thing?

Emily Huebscher: No, no.

Janet Marder: Writing and teaching and pastoral counseling and life cycle involvement. Most I think.

Emily Huebscher: What is it about you that made you able to succeed as a pioneer woman rabbi?

Janet Marder: I think that my skills were a pretty good match to the work.

Emily Huebscher: Which skills in particular?

Janet Marder: I work very hard. I really try, and I try to do my best at whatever I do. I could have gone into engineering school and tried really hard and been unable to do it, so it is a good match for what I am able to do.

Emily Huebscher: Which skills in particular?

Janet Marder: Well I think I'm excited by learning and that helps in my teaching. I really value language and take a lot of thought and care in writing and delivering sermons. I think that I care a lot about people and those skills have been important in the work that I do.

Emily Huebscher: And what advice do you have for future rabbis?

Janet Marder: I think it is important to have a deep sense of personal faith and faith in the work that we do, because when you work among large groups of people who do not value Jewish life and Judaism as much as rabbis do, you need to have inner reservoirs to sustain you from feeling despair. I also think that to do my job well does, by my job I mean being the senior rabbi of a large place, does require very significant time commitments, and I think just speaking personally, it wouldn't be fair for me to try to do this work if I also had children at home. I would feel, I don't think I would feel like I could give a really good quality effort to either family or work if I were trying to do this work and I had kids at home.

Emily Huebscher: Would you feel similarly for men with children at home?

Janet Marder: I have never been a dad. My husband, at the same time that I left congregational work because at that point our children were two and five, he left congregational work, he's a rabbi too, and we both made the decision that we wanted to have more time for each other and more time for our children. So, yeah, I think that might be a hard thing to do for people with young children the way that, I mean, my predecessor had a stay at home wife. If I were a guy who had a stay at home wife I might feel very differently.

Emily Huebscher: If you had a stay at home husband?

Janet Marder: Yeah. If I had a stay at home husband as one of the people on our staff does I would probably feel okay. I would probably miss being away from the children myself, being the kind of mom I was, but I would feel that they were getting attention and I was doing my work. It isn't what I would have wanted to do, let me put it that way. When my kids were little I wanted to be with them more.

Emily Huebscher: Did you meet your husband in rabbinical school?

Janet Marder: I did.

Emily Huebscher: I have heard a couple of the other rabbis say things along the lines of people expecting them to find husbands in rabbinical school, and that's why they went there.

Janet Marder: Wait, you mean, they themselves expected to find a husband?

Emily Huebscher: No, people expected them to, people assumed that's why they went to rabbinical school.

Janet Marder: Really? Wow, no. I guess it would have been the place since there weren't a lot of women, but that never occurred to me.

Emily Huebscher: Not saying that you did, but...

Janet Marder: No one ever said it to me, go to rabbinical school to find a husband, no one ever said that.

Emily Huebscher: Thank you so much for answering all of my questions. Do you have anything else you would like to add?

Janet Marder: Do you have a particular thesis that you are examining and trying to test?

Emily Huebscher: I don't. I am really more interested in helping to relay the stories of female rabbis and the things that were assumed about female rabbis and how they actually were.

Janet Marder: Are you finding that there are some assumptions that are not being born out by what you are hearing?

Emily Huebscher: Yeah, absolutely. I think that people assumed women would be good with children, and warm and welcoming, and lots of things. Not that they are not, but just that they don't consider those things their strengths or the things they enjoy most about the rabbinate.

Janet Marder: I think there are all kinds of women, and that is gender stereotyping that just isn't accurate. So I think that is actually healthy that women are not being looked at as a gender but as individuals. We just went through the whole hiring process. We interviewed 23 or 24 students, and there were across the board among the many women we interviewed all sorts of personalities, and I think it is a good thing when people start to see that.

Emily Huebscher: Yeah, me too. Thank you very much and I look forward to meeting you.

Janet Marder: I look forward to meeting you too Emily. Good luck with your thesis.

**Interviewer: Emily Huebscher, 5<sup>th</sup> year student HUC**

**With: Rabbi Mindy Avra Portnoy, 1980**

**Date: February 9, 2010**

Emily Huebscher: Thank you so much for agreeing to talk with me. When you first thought about being a rabbi?

Mindy Portnoy: This is for your thesis?

Emily Huebscher: I'm writing on the pioneering rabbis.

Mindy Portnoy: Always glad to be a pioneer.

My junior year of college was in 1971-72, and that of course was the year, '72 when Sally Priesand was ordained. I was majoring in religious studies, essentially Jewish studies but there was no Jewish Studies major where I was, and so I was Religious Studies and I was in Israel for my junior year abroad at Hebrew University and was thinking about continuing in Judaic Studies in some way and maybe going to get a Ph.D. or maybe Jewish Social work, and that was the moment in which my mother sent me the article that was in the New York Times about Sally Priesand which I still have and I've shown to Sally much to her chagrin many times, and it talked about her becoming the first woman Rabbi and so the timing was pretty fortuitous because I was thinking about what to do in the area of Jewish Studies and then suddenly, gee, I can go to rabbinical school but it did take me another two years before I actually went to rabbinical school. But that's when I first thought about it.

Emily Huebscher: What did you do for those two years?

Mindy Portnoy: I spent a year at a place that maybe you've never hear of or maybe you have, the Dropsie College, a college which used to be a graduate school of Semitic and Cognate Learning in Philadelphia. It's now part of Penn. But I spent a year in graduate school because they were offering money, very nice top scholarships to new graduates trying to revive the place, and I thought I really wanted to get a Ph.D. so I spent a year there in Philadelphia and then decided I didn't want to get a Ph.D. So I went back to New Haven where my then boy friend, now husband for many years, was finishing college. I worked for a year and then reapplied to HUC. I had applied once and withdrawn the applications and then re-applied starting in '75. And I was ordained in 1980.

Emily Huebscher: Feminism and femininity.

Mindy Portnoy: Absolutely! Absolutely, I consider myself a feminist. And I've always thought of it as women having the same rights and responsibilities just as men. That we all have equal rights and responsibilities and in that way I'm still of the equal rights feminism group. How can I not be? In addition to rabbinic school; it's coincidental, but maybe not, I was in the first class of women at Yale University, the first entering class of freshmen. And so because of timing, I'm very aware of history and timing, it was possible for me to do these things. So, yes, I definitely consider myself a feminist.

Emily Huebscher: Definition changed?

Mindy Portnoy: No, I don't think they have, in the sense that I still think it's great that my daughter thinks about things in different ways than I do, now an adult, she makes assumptions about what she can or can't do in somewhat different ways than I did. Because I was right at the edge of where women could really do just about anything they wanted. Whereas my sister's who's 6 years older still thought in more... she went to college and still thought more in terms of maybe a career but she'd also get married, kind of

different way we looked at things, my daughter can't even imagine how couldn't I have become a rabbi, why would it be a problem. a different way of looking at the world and I would like to still look at the world that way although we have a lot to accomplish still. I don't think everything's been accomplished. I don't think my views have changed very much at all since then.

I'm not much in favor of some new ways that younger women look at issues, rituals that are specifically women's issues, *Rosh Chodesh* rituals and things like that. I'm not looking for more single-sex ceremonies; I'm still looking for egalitarianism, plain and simple. Not so simple, but plain.

Emily Huebscher:

What role did being a woman play in your rabbinate?

Mindy Portnoy:

Well that's changed over time. When I first became a rabbi in 1980, a lot of things were about that because of people's views. When I moved to Washington DC, every group wanted me to come speak about women rabbis, women in the rabbinate, or Judaism and Women. It didn't matter what else you might be interested in, it was a very central part of my being and how people viewed me and also most people, how many thousands of people would come up... we used to joke at our women rabbi meetings about you should have a card that would answer the questions, how many woman rabbis are there? When was the first woman rabbi ordained? What will they call your husband? You know you could just hand out a card because people would say the same thing every time. Or they would say, wow, this is the first service I've ever been to with a woman rabbi and you'd kind of always have to have a good sense of humor and not want to say well it's amazing that the roof didn't fall off the building. There were certain things... you couldn't not be seen as a woman rabbi at that time, everybody saw it that way, whether they were positive or negative, it was just what it was. And over the years, that's really changed, for a while it changed to people still noticing but making comments like, oh, my cousin's rabbi out in California, she's a woman too, you know you'd hear that and now when someone actually says something about it I'm kind of surprised because very few people comment on the fact of my being a female and being a rabbi. That has really changed, I think the view point out there in the world, I get a different reaction than I used to have, so not so much my own views but other people's views. I guess over the years as a rabbi you get used to yourself being a rabbi, but that probably true for men as well, maybe a little bit more for women, in my time it was a little bit more unusual so I think we were more maybe self-conscious about it.

Emily Huebscher:

Gender affect liturgical choices and your sermons?

Mindy Portnoy:

I was first of all a Hillel Director for five years and then I came to Temple Sinai, starting part time and moving up to full time over the years; I've been there 24 years now I guess, altogether. Some of the changes actually at Temple Sinai like the fact that we did... changed gender views on God and used language that was gender neutral even before I got there, but I get the credit for it even though I was not the one who actually made the change but people would assume I did because I was the "woman" rabbi so I don't know in terms of being a part of a progressive congregation where they had women Presidents and women student rabbis before me, though not an ordained Rabbi. I'm not sure that it did affect me so much except in so far there were certain ceremonies, I did encourage people in early years when I was doing more free lance work when I was Hillel Director and I did other ceremonies in the community, especially baby girl naming ceremonies at a time when that wasn't quite as common as it is now, I was very encouraging

because I felt if we're going to do something for boys we need to do something for girls. I did a lot of those in the early days. I made an effort to really focus on that, and of course when I had my own daughter that was important but otherwise liturgically I don't know that it's had so much of an effect on me in that way, or my being all that creative in that area particularly, other areas but not liturgy so much.

Emily Huebscher: Conscious of other choices based on gender?

Mindy Portnoy: Well, I did make some career choices in the sense that I, for a while there after I was at Hillel for 5 years which was a full time job and then first at Temple Sinai which was the job that was available I did work more part time at the Temple when I had my second child and I did other things in the community but I was not working totally full time as a congregational rabbi; I think that had something to do with gender. Other choices are I wrote Ema on the Bima, my children's books some of them had been connected to... certainly was a gender choice and being involved in women rabbinic organizations and all that kind of thing, I was involved in that from the very start, we always felt very conscious in the beginning, in school and afterwards everything we did would be judged not just about us as individuals but about all women rabbis and no matter what you did people were going to see you not just as Mindy Portnoy or whoever else you were, but they were going to see you were representing all women rabbis; and I don't think that's necessarily good I'm glad that's not so true any more but that's what it was, whatever we did whether it was good or it was bad.... And people got us mixed up too, people often thought I was Ellen Lewis who's someone who's my generation of rabbi and we both have dark curly hair, barely look alike at all, but people are always telling me they heard me speak or they told her they heard her speak and it was sort of like if it's one woman rabbi is all women rabbis so it was both positive and negative; there was a sense we were representing more than ourselves, I don't feel that so much any more I did feel that a lot in the early days, I feel like I lived in horse and buggy times.

Emily Huebscher: Can you tell me a little more about Ema on the Bima? I read that you wrote that.

Mindy Portnoy: Ema on the Bima, I think I came up with the title first and I figured some one was going to write it, so why not me. I started thinking there needed to be a children's book, this is actually before I had children; no, I actually had my daughter by then, people often think it was for my children but they were not old enough then, my son had just been born. I wrote it because I discovered there really weren't book about rabbis and what they do, just for kids. What are rabbis and what do they do? Actually that's what Ema on the Bima is, if you read it carefully; it's not really about women rabbis. it's about a rabbi and what a rabbi does. People see it about as about *Ema* who's a rabbi but it could just as well have been *Abba* as a rabbi except it wouldn't have been as interesting, and no one really would have cared but it was interesting, the experience was, talking about what rabbis do and it sort of depended upon where you were generationally as to whether you saw it was about a woman rabbi or you just saw it as a rabbi who happened to be a woman. There is nowhere in the book where a child say, oh, this is cool my mom's a rabbi, no women are rabbis or women, this is something new, there's nothing in the book that says that; about what rabbis do and it happens to be this child's mother, not her father. The other thing was that the book actually was controversial when it came out, there were quite a number of Jewish book stores who would not carry the book, they had too many orthodox customers, I felt like I had written pornography or something, there were literally stores who

would not carry it, it was actually kind of a publishing risk for \_\_\_\_\_ to even publish it because there were so many people in the Jewish community who would not buy the book, it was only a small niche, which is the Jewish children's book niche, and there were so many people who just wouldn't buy because it was about women rabbis, and they're not going to buy it for their kids. So that whole experience was interesting and getting to know some people doing book signings and all that. What is really funny now, is that women who are rabbis, who are young rabbis, will tell me that their mother or father read this to them, or that they knew the book when they were young, and I say oh my God I feel so old. But, I feel good about that; it's going to be the 25th anniversary of Ema on the Bima next year and I feels like a lifetime ago. But it started with the title, and I thought someone else is going to write it, so I wrote it. I wrote some other children's books too. It started with the title and went on from there. I find it very amusing when sometimes people come up to me a women's conferences or at regular CCAR conferences and will say, Mindy Portnoy, oh, you're Ema on the Bima, right? and I feel like I'm the Ramma or something, but it's you're the something as opposed to... so I say oh, yeah, I'm Ema on the Bima; it was a great experience I'm really glad I wrote that.

Emily Huebscher: Do you feel like you were part of the generation who shaped the future on women in the rabbinate?

Mindy Portnoy: Yeah I do, I think it's funny when people use the word pioneer, we all kind of giggle about that, yeah people would say to me did you think about being a rabbi when you were young, well I'd have to have had more imagination than that, no, I didn't think about being a rabbi when I was young. First of all, I grew up in a conservative Jewish background but it wouldn't have made much difference if I had grown up reform. It was something I never would have considered... so everything we had to make up. At one Women's Rabbinic Network conference a session was on how do you dress, like if you're doing a *mincha bar mitzvah* and you have to go to some evening party dress for one thing then another how do you dress, what about clothes, what do you wear, even your hair. People notice everything, they still do that, by the way, that still different between female and male rabbis, people will still say things about... oh you got a hair cut or I like that dress, in ways that they never talk to my colleagues who are male rabbis. People are always commenting and they notice everything that you wear. That kind of thing, but we used to talk about that, what do you wear. How risqué a dress are you going to wear to an evening party, or what's appropriate and we didn't have any role models. I'm not saying it to sound pathetic; it was just what it was. The only professor at rabbinic school who was a woman was the speech teacher at the time; there was no one else. There were no women rabbis out there so you could say, oh well, there was Sally and Laura Geller a couple of people who were ahead of us in school in my class but it wasn't as if you had role models where you could say I want to be like her but not like her. In some ways it was very liberating because you could be anybody. We could make it up but that was also a little scary when you were just out of school and you were... it's weird enough to be a rabbi but then to be a woman rabbi it just adds to... to this day if I'm on an airplane or something in casual conversation with someone and they say "what do you do, what kind of work do you do?" I have to decide right at that moment if I want a half hour conversation or if I just want to say, yes and then go back to my book. If I say, I'm a rabbi that's a half hour conversation whether they're Jewish or Catholic or anything, because they're interested and they're more interested because I'm a woman, so that's till there but it used to be really interesting. If you

were to say that to someone in 1981 oh I didn't know that there were women rabbis, it went through the whole series of questions. You know sometimes you felt like you were educating people but on the other hand got a little boring after a while to answer the same questions over and over and to feel like you always had to represent something, something other than just you, but women in other professions had to do that too, it was not dissimilar. But people have weird feelings about rabbis. Fortunately, I was married before I started rabbinical school so I didn't have to worry about dealing with the whole dating thing and telling people who you were interested in going out with, oh what do? I'm a rabbi. A lot of my single friends had to deal with that but I didn't have to deal with that. I was happy about that. People always assume my husband's a rabbi, they would always assume that, I didn't really get that, they would ask oh, is your husband a rabbi too, and I'd say, no, and I think they were surprised. They think that all rabbis marry rabbis.

Emily Huebscher: Pressures unique to you as a pioneer.

Mindy Portnoy: Representation of oneself representing a larger group that's not you, all women rabbis were not alike and yet we were perceived as one group and that was frustrating when I was deciding am I going to leave Hillel every decision monumental that it felt like that what you did people would say that's what women rabbis do, work in congregations work in Hillel first hard decision was like oh well I should take that assistantship on Long Island or whatever because that's the prestige job and women are going to take those jobs extra pressure, extra stress, am I letting down my colleagues and future extra layer to it which I still think is true, to some degree it's still true because I dealt with it all these years related to women in the rabbinate issue now we're moving to retirement age, what do you do, I guess I talked about aging until last year how many retired women rabbis do I know, now I know a couple, a few but every move you go through in life you never have the role models and I think that goes with a certain stress, we also have this great congeniality I knew every female rabbi in the world and I did, once upon a time I used to know everyone by name now I go to conferences and I don't know half the people that was both a little weird but very special relationship you know some other... not the wife, now it's like who cares.

Emily Huebscher: Conscious of greater changes in the rabbinate?

Mindy Portnoy: Style informal in terms of just my generation is not just about women rabbi people coming out who really were not of the same stylistic ilk of the rabbis who preceded us, speaking in deep voice, a looser more casual more empowering the congregation, not looking down at people, women rabbis are different some are more casual women rabbis were part of that loosening up and more equal relationship congregations. I don't know if it's the chicken before the egg did women serve as a catalyst or just in that generation Rabbi Dan and Rabbi Jeff not that I want anybody to call me Rabbi Mindy. It did change.

Emily Huebscher: Navy Blue Suit or Goddess

Mindy Portnoy: I hate to put myself as somewhere in the middle but I might have to do that. I think about myself as me I wore a robe once borrowed one from Roz Gold felt very stiff and weird and didn't feel very Jewish wore real clothes but not navy blue suits but professional liked to be called Rabbi Portnoy or Mindy, press would call her Rabbi Sally deprecating, couldn't believe there was a woman rabbi. Important to establish a professional image. But a rabbi show one by nature informal put on a different persona I probably curse more at home trying to be profession. What was the goddess was one of

them. I'm definitely not a goddess, but the navy blue suit makes me nervous too. Creative casual clear about boundaries people who you're friendly with but ultimately congregants I'm not really their friend if they need me to be the rabbi for I'm clear about boundaries funny but I never cross certain boundaries when someone dies or they want to talk about something I'm more than just their friend I'm conscious of that.

Emily Huebscher: Base more on professional women or rabbinical men

Mindy Portnoy: Rabbinical men were never my role models with other women clergy and other women professionals. Navy blue suit thing, I don't think I was ever there. Shana Potter worked with us and wore pant suits on the *bima*. She's 25 years younger than I am. Pant suits on the *bima*, one day I did it no one notices 6-7 years ago, my mother's voice in my head, I started wearing a pants suit big sartorial change our male rabbi he decided he wasn't wearing a robe any more he gave up on robes. I look kind of ridiculous up there. I still don't really feel right wearing a pants suit. Men seemed like a whole other world.

Emily Huebscher: Challenges in creating what you looked like.

Mindy Portnoy: Everyone, not so much in Hillel, but when I started working in a congregation everyone notices, recently I stopped coloring my hair and I can tell you I know every woman thinking oh, she stopped dying her hair, the day I color my hair again somebody will say oh I like your hair. Stiletto heels, great shoes and people always talk to her about her shoes they notice everything. I was going to tell you I liked that the last time you wore it some visual image about the woman rabbi like Michelle Obama when I meet with families about a funeral I dress differently that if I'm just hanging around the office. Wanting to present... just today I was talking to a family about a funeral didn't wear that much jewelry, very sad death I did think about what I was going to wear. It's a men and women thing. Except when he changed his facial hair people commented. That's the way it is.

Emily Huebscher: Stories about comments

Mindy Portnoy: No, the only time I got an anonymous letter upset about some dress I wore on the High Holidays but I do remember it, a V-neck, she thought it was too not covered up enough. You don't get too many negative things you might hear it behind the scenes. Have you been losing weight, I'm a little over-weight. Oh, you've lost some weight and I haven't. Why are they.... It's just weird... there are 1200 people in my congregation younger who like clothes and jewelry. But our cantor wears gorgeous earrings but it's there. It does have a certain affect on your relationship with people. The look thing is not what I'm really doing. If I were a model but it doesn't really have to do with anything.

Emily Huebscher: Shaped future

Mindy Portnoy: Yeah, the younger women will shape the image in new ways, they are. Jessica and I talk about that a lot, her parents are younger than I am and she's my colleagues we share this incredible commonality because we are women in the rabbinate predominately male makes us comrades both assistant rabbis are different certain connection to them because we are women and I saw the future of females in the rabbinate in five years they'll have children and we won't have to worry about this women made different choice about their careers more of a problem recruiting male rabbis we made it possible we didn't screw up so totally that women can't be rabbis any more. You want to feel like you made it possible for even more women.

Emily Huebscher: Picture of the female rabbi

Mindy Portnoy: More diversified people don't have one image we were starting they didn't know what to think what would a woman rabbi be like you didn't think of woman and rabbi in the same breathe now no one does that we're all really different from each other look different, different views of every possible issue some straight gay married kids some don't models that are available so you don't think I can only be a rabbi if feel that kind of pressure any more that you have to be one kind of things I like some we don't all have to be friends that's the biggest change.

Emily Huebscher: Assumptions?

Mindy Portnoy: Not any more, it's just me as a rabbi as a person don't think they're... I don't really think the assumption general assumption any more. In the early days, a little weird about it that you'd want to be a rabbi friends of theirs what's a nice Jewish girl want to be a rabbi for one of the many things women do I just don't get comments any more older people become asexual people don't see the gender any more opinions of me as me

Emily Huebscher: Professional realities. Greatest Success

Mindy Portnoy: My greatest success programmatically the best thing I did, my adult bar and bat mitzvah classes education and bringing people more knowledge about Judaism a whole cadre of people very connected very involved. My children's books really matter to me, Passover book, they are like my children I'm glad I wrote them glad we dealt with issues are important. Keeping my sanity and my personality through all these years of being a rabbi. Being a congregational rabbi person I know very well is planning her funeral in my adult bat mitzvah class in the middle of them all really hard things sad and hard and difficult so much to deal with glad I am able to help people with those things in their lives order to the chaos of life, sounds pretty pretentious I have made a difference in individual people's lives, how I help individuals and families those moments where it matters and my children turned out well did not become crazy rabbi's children survived this very bizarre job their mother has

Emily Huebscher: Being a women

Mindy Portnoy: I wouldn't have been a rabbi if I had been a man; the uniqueness of being a woman it would be weird it would be different this unique element connect to people they had no expectations more open to relationships and connection and being interested in what I represented.

**Interviewer:** Emily Huebscher, 5<sup>th</sup> year student HUC

**With:** Rabbi Sally J. Pries and, 1972

**Date:** February 18, 2010

### Feminism and Femininity

Emily Huebscher: How did the idea of feminism play into your rabbinate. Do you consider yourself a feminist? How do you define feminism?

Sally Priesand: Well I definitely consider myself a feminist because I believe that fem simply means every person should have the opportunity to become all that he or she is capable of becoming and I'm so in that sense definitely a feminist. Having just done this exhibit and going through all the papers and newspaper clippings and everything, I said some things that were really dumb. I don't know if you came across some of them; but I think that I probably said them because of the time in which everything unfolded. Remember that I decided I wanted to be a rabbi in 1962 that was before the feminist movement, it was before Betty Friedan's book and in that time, in that period of time, the early years when I was in rabbinic school, women's lib was a negative term. And I've been thinking a lot about this lately, when there is a movement and your trying to make significant changes, you have to have people to do a lot of different components, so you have to have some people out there protesting, and marching, speaking, screaming and yelling and you also have to have some people who are just quietly accomplishing the goal and they both sort of come together then to make a difference. I was more in the background trying to accomplish the goal, and so I very often said I wasn't into women's lib and in a certain sense that was true only because I didn't feel I personally didn't have anything to be liberated from. In my family my brothers and I were treated the same, and also my parents encouraged me to be a rabbi if that's what I wanted to do, so I would often say I'm not in women's lib because again, women's lib had a negative connotation in those days and I also I said some really stupid things, like if I married a rabbi I would only be an assistant because a man should be the head of the house. I wish I could take those out of the articles, but, you can't change history.

Emily Huebscher: Well you kind of changed history but you can't edit history.

Sally Priesand: Well that's truly what happened. I hope that answers your question.

Emily Huebscher: Has your definition of feminism changed throughout your life?

Sally Priesand: I don't think so because I still have that same basic belief that feminism should make it possible for every person, man or women, to be all that he or she is capable of becoming.

The one area I have become openly more of a feminist because I do believe very strongly, obviously, that women should be paid equally and all of those kinds of things, the laundry list of things that we're still trying to accomplish. When I speak and when I go out to lecture and everything I always mention those kinds of things that we've made progress but we haven't made all of the progress that we need to make. we have to fight sexual harassment and unequal pay and we still need to get women in the highest levels of leadership. In the reform movement we certainly have made progress. From the early days of my rabbinate, I was a strong supporter of making sure that there were more women on the faculty of the college institute and fortunately that has happened.

Emily Huebscher: Best for women in the rabbinate that weren't best for you personally, are there any decisions you regret.

Sally Priesand: I really didn't. I tried to be an example and I was always conscious when you're the first of something you're conscious of the fact that people judge the idea of women in the rabbinate by how you fulfill your responsibilities. I was very conscious of that. And even as a congregational rabbi I was conscious of the fact that people who came to visit our synagogue, people who came to a bar or bat mitzvah ceremony, for them it was the first time they had experienced a woman as a rabbi and when they walked out the door their whole concept of women rabbis had to do with how I did that day. So and obviously rabbis aren't always at their best. I cannot think of any decisions I made that I wish I'd made differently. I really can't.

Emily Huebscher: What role did women have in changing the rabbinate as a whole.

Sally Priesand: I think that women have brought a new sense of partnership and networking to the rabbinate I really think that even today there is a difference in the style of leadership that a woman has and that a man has. I've seen it and very often men... again, I don't like to make generalizations, but we know that studies have shown that women are more interested in networking and in relationships than in authority. I grew up when male rabbis were pretty much in charge; and in many congregations that rabbi would say, this is what we're going to do and the board would say fine thank you, and there wasn't really any discussion. I didn't want to be that kind of rabbi; I wanted to make sure that I was certain that I was in partnership with the members of my congregation. I made that very clear at my first interview. I think that women have changed the rabbinate that way; I think they've also allowed men to be more nurturing openly. And also, women have... At least I can speak for myself, I, my congregation, taught me that success didn't mean bigger. I don't know how it is now but when I was in rabbinic school the goal was always was to have an E congregation and there was almost a feeling that if at some point in your life, you didn't make it there, you were a failure. My congregation taught me that success doesn't mean bigger, it means Are we doing better today than we did yesterday. That, to me, is what success means. I think that women have made it more acceptable to choose to have a smaller congregation; at the same time if a woman wants a large congregation, there shouldn't be any barriers standing in the way.

Emily Huebscher: Pressures have changed over the years.

Sally Priesand: Well, I don't know; that's kind of a hard question. I don't know what you really mean by pressure.

Emily Huebscher: You spoke about a lot the pressure you had making sure you represented women in the rabbinate.

Sally Priesand: That part has changed because there are so many women rabbis and there was a point in my career when I finally said to myself, well, ok, I can start saying no to things now, because there are many other women who can do this, who can go speak somewhere or whatever. I don't have to do all of it. So in that sense, actually here I was always able at \_\_\_ - reform temple to be the rabbi, not the first woman rabbi... My congregation just saw me as their rabbi.

Emily Huebscher: When did that shift happen in your life.

Sally Priesand: Probably started to happen more in the 1980's. ...and I think that some pressure is less because the classes at the college institute have so many women. So when you're at the college institute now, you are part... you know, you

have a group, a support group and of course we have the Women's Rabbinic Network which is a wonderful support too.

Emily Huebscher: Superficial image. Many of the women who I interview, you of Did you ever feel copied?

Sally Priesand: One of the things I'm proudest of is that little girls can grow up knowing that they can be rabbis if they want to. And I always tried my best to respond to women who were thinking about getting into the rabbinate, kids who were writing reports about me. I've had over the years a lot of conference calls, and I remember once they named a cabin for me down in our camp down in Mississippi, and we arranged a conference call so the girls in the cabin could talk to me, I had a group of 1<sup>st</sup> graders out in Denver called to speak to me and then they wrote the cutest letters, thank you letters. I have a packet of material when kids are doing reports about me in religious schools around the country.

Some early articles, a little bit about my history that makes it easier for them to write a report. I remember once it was a school in Kentucky, the report was written by a boy, which I thought was interesting and he said he picked me because I was the only one still alive on the list. I've always tried to be there to be helpful and actually a lot of my colleagues when their children have to write reports, they've contacted me. And I spoke to their children, which I always find to be very interesting.

I've never felt copied. I've always felt that if this is what people want to do, they should do it and they should be patient and they should maintain their sense of humor.

Emily Huebscher: Fashion

Sally Priesand: Well, I decided early on to be myself. And so people often were not pleased that I had short mini skirts, high boots, and long hair. Some of those pictures have made it into various books and were reprinted in various articles around the country and around the world. In terms of being On the bima I think it is very important for a woman to wear a robe I know that today, it's not the fashion and most younger rabbis I know of have gotten rid of robes and I know here in my own temple that as soon as I left, people got rid of robes, I think it's important because I know how people are and I know that they sit in the congregation and they look to see what the rabbi or the cantor is wearing that day, and the shoes, and the this.... And if you fiddle with anything, so to me I think it's much easier to wear a robe, and I didn't particularly like black so I chose a royal blue or a blue robe and when I was in my last year of school and was in intern at the Wise Temple in Cincinnati, all of the rabbis switched to blue. Which is why the rabbis at Wise temple still today wear blue. Although, they don't wear the correct blue, but they wear the blue. And I was told that Rabbi \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_ Shalom was buried in his blue robe. I still to this day wear a blue robe. Now when I fill in at my temple, I can't wear a robe anymore because that's not the *minchag* so I have a whole bunch of different *tallitot*. I should mention because I think this is unusual, I've never worn pants on the *bima* and I didn't wear pants to work either. I always work, I thought it was more appropriate, I always wore a skirt, you know of course in my earlier years it wasn't that common for women to be always wearing pants, I lived through that change and I don't know, Maybe I did it just because unconsciously it is a distinction between men and women I don't know, but I even today I go to services every week, I sit in the pews, and I get dressed for Shabbat.

Emily Huebscher: Who were your role models? Did you model yourself after professional women or rabbinical men.

Sally Priesand: I don't think I had any specific role models, but I'm sure that definitely that is was probably more Rabbinical men, those were the only rabbis that I knew and again, as I said, I always tried to be true to myself. But there wasn't really anybody for me to follow.

Emily Huebscher: Favorite story about comments on how you looked?

Sally Priesand: Grocery store and somebody say,

Emily Huebscher: Decision that you made do you think most shaped the images of future image of female rabbis.

Sally Priesand: That I made? Again, I don't know again I have to say that the fact that I was myself and that I encouraged other women to be themselves you know, a lot of people had opinions of what I should be like because I was the first; but again I tried always to be true to myself and I think it's very important to know yourself and to be yourself. I think the other thing is that I did what I set out to do; I went to rabbinic school to be a congregational rabbi, at the first there were probably a lot of things I could have done, but I didn't, I chose just to be a congregational rabbi which is what I wanted to be, and I was lucky to find a congregation where I remained for 25 years, retiring was my own decision because I do believe that rabbis and a lot of other people should know when to leave. You should leave when people still like you.

Emily Huebscher: What were those things that people wanted you to be like?

Sally Priesand: I suppose having to do with my dress and different things like that, primarily.

Emily Huebscher: If you were entering the rabbinate now what decisions do you think you would make.

Sally Priesand: I would probably do the same thing. I don't see myself as anything but a congregational rabbi. Also, I consciously made the decision not to marry and have children and now I seem to still be ok with that. Some people can combine a family and a profession; I knew that I wouldn't be able to do it, that's the thing about knowing yourself. I would be pulled in too many directions, and so the congregation became my family, and I'm grateful that I had the opportunity to touch the lives of so many people and have a role in the lives of so many children. I always would have wanted to be home with my kids and that never would work. There was a little change in my life 8 years ago when I got a dog and I discovered that I ran home a lot more than I used to. I brought him to the temple at night when nobody was around. He considered it to be his playground. I also had his third birthday party at the Temple, I rented the social hall and about 25 dogs and we had a great time. Kids loved bringing their dogs.

Emily Huebscher: My last section is on the professional realities. What do you consider your greatest success?

Sally Priesand: I'm not certain that I would want to say. I take great pride in knowing that I was a successful we're known as the social action temple here in \_\_\_\_ and the fact I was able to combine so many \_\_\_\_ organization \_\_\_\_ congregational rabbi to the best of my ability \_\_\_\_.

Emily Huebscher: Being a woman

Sally Priesand: I probably feel that aware of making those generalities that probably not a good idea I don't think necessarily it was because I was a

woman but that it was more about qualities I that have as a person, myself. Trying to \_\_\_\_ those qualities, I just don't think that being a woman has all that much to do... I guess I think of myself not so much as a woman rabbi but as a rabbi who happens to be a woman.

Emily Huebscher: What do you enjoy the most

Sally Priesand: Probably Preaching. I like to challenge. I preached every week, I preached on Shabbat morning as well as Shabbat evening and bar and bat mitzvahs. I always considered preaching was an act of adult education. I felt it was important to have something to say.

Emily Huebscher: What is it about you that made you able to succeed?

Sally Priesand: I have a good sense of humor. \_\_\_\_ When I was in school, I never argued, I would say tell me why this is \_\_\_\_ rabbi \_\_\_\_ along the way. I had a strong belief \_\_\_\_ God and a desire to serve other people and help to preserve tradition and I'm a very organized person and so that's a gift God blessed me with to be organized in speaking and preaching, tasks everyday. I think it makes a difference.

Emily Huebscher: What advice.

Sally Priesand: Know yourself, be yourself, don't be afraid to fail, maintain your sense of humor. Remember that humility is a great virtue.

Emily Huebscher: Thank you so much.

**Interviewer:** Emily Huebscher, 5<sup>th</sup> year student HUC

**With:** Rabbi Deborah Prinz, 1978

**Date:** Januray 26, 2010

Emily Huebscher: Recording for the archives. Thank you so much

Deborah Prinz: My pleasure

Emily Huebscher: Did you have anything you wanted to focus on?

Deborah Prinz: You have a lot of great questions. We can go wherever you would like. Where would you like to start?

Emily Huebscher: When you first thought about becoming a Rabbi.

Deborah Prinz: I began to thinking about becoming a rabbi when I had already a student at HUC in LA in Education program so finished undergrad I decided to go to HUC in that program because I wanted to be involved the Jewish community and like everyone wanted to do it better than I had experienced it and improve it and I always liked my Jewish experiences and thought that would be a good place to make a contribution so I went to the Ed program, the masters program and was in class with a lot of rabbinic students and a lot of our classes were shared classes on the other hand they also did text classes that we did not get to do and they had the year in Israel so I had Rabbi envy I guess it could be wonderful and exciting to become a rabbi and switch into the program so it was really when I was about 21/22 that it occurred to me that I could even be a rabbi because I didn't know until I went to HUC that just the year before Sally had been ordained. So I did not grow up with this possibility; before me there weren't any and I had no idea so it was an eye-opener for me and I jumped on it.

Emily Huebscher: Cool. What role did being a women play in your rabbinate?

Deborah Prinz: That's a very good question also. That's complicated to unpack I think. I was one of the first ordained so I think technically I was the 4<sup>th</sup> woman ordained in a class that had 4 women in 1978 and we were all very conscious of being different, of being new, of being pioneers and there were certain issues that had not been resolved by the movement and certain expectations that were not clear in congregations or in the field about the role that women could play or should play. We attempted to develop communication with the leadership of the movement at the CCAR and the URJ at that time to address pay equity, placement procedures that were fair to women as well as men, maternity leave that nobody had ever thought about and thus we have now parenting leave in the gold book so I think it played a very big role actually in my rabbinate in certain respects, that the comfort level of the movement had to shift, the mind set of folks out there in congregation-land had to shift so that when I first would be on the *bima* for time to time my first congregation in Central Synagogue where there were a lot of visitors and there were a lot of people coming through who were not necessarily congregants, people when we were in receiving line what were you doing on the *bima* even though I had participated in the service and my name was in bulletin, the Shabbat handout, people could not... very hard for them to make that shift "what is this woman doing here", they were just so not used to it. There was a lot of culture shift going on and that had to do with being a woman and I think it had to do with how people hear women's voices for instance, if I were to talk about an issue related to equal rights in those days or the equal rights amendment or abortion, choice issues if I spoke about them from the *bima* sometimes people heard that as me talking about a women's issue because I'm a women and that's it, end of story, rather than here's my rabbi addressing an

issue from a Jewish perspective because it's a religious issue and reform Judaism had something to say about equal right for women and reform Judaism has sometime to say about free choice for abortion. So my senior Rabbi at Central Synagogue would change the gender language to make it neutral because at that point we had just beginning to use Gates of Prayer but the language hadn't really fully been shifted to more neutral language and he would neutralize it and I would too basically the same way he did and we were pretty much coordinated about how to do that but people would make comments about my doing it and not make comments about him doing it. For him to do it they didn't really notice it but when I did it stood out as oh my gosh she's foisting her feminism on us in a way that we don't feel comfortable about. So down the road as I decided to have children, issues about maternity leave which had not by the time I decided to have children which was in 1983 and 1986 really fully clear in the guidelines so I had a real tough negotiation in my then congregation in Tea Neck about what that might mean; they actually put a clause in the contract before I signed it that said that I would be responsible for coverage should I be off the *bima* for two or three months and I was told by somebody who was at the congregational meeting where that was discussed by the congregation that that was put in there because of their fears I might in fact become pregnant and that I might in fact, be off the *bima* for a while. So it was addressed in this very circuitous way that really sort of put me at risk but I signed the contract at the advice of certain leaders in the reform movement at that time and then had to hash it out with them in a very uncomfortable way. Things, when I look back, it's 30 years already, things are so much more comfortable I think for our colleagues who are women and for men too because there's a paternity- there's a parenting leave, the guidelines are clear and the presence of women is so much more a fact on the *bima* and there are so many women out there in the congregational world and also in the community-based organizations of the Jewish community I just think it's not such a novelty any more and I think that we're way down the road in terms of what people see and what people understand and what people expect of women Rabbis.

Emily Huebscher: What did people expect?

Deborah Prinz: I don't think they knew what to expect. I think that they expected women perhaps in some degrees and perhaps we were a little confused too and to be an imitation of a man in some respects to dress in a regular suit; not be out there about our issues as women and maybe not to be so strong in our opinions and I think that has in some degree shifted.

Emily Huebscher: Can I ask how you define feminism and if you consider yourself a feminist?

Deborah Prinz: I've been a feminist for a long time and I was very influenced by the feminist movement and I think I wouldn't have thought about becoming a rabbi and the possibilities in that period of time if I hadn't known about feminism and hadn't been spurred on by it and the awareness of the value and the role and the leadership potential of women was certainly very potent discussion in the days that I was thinking about becoming a rabbi and the time I did become a rabbi so I think definitely feminism has influenced me greatly and I am a feminist in a positive sense, and I think that there are people who don't understand what that is, and see that as negative and \_\_\_\_ have been I think that societal and political and cultural implications of feminism have been very profound and I think we wouldn't be where we are in the rabbinate today if feminism had not affect us and influenced us then and now.

Emily Huebscher: Anything specific that you can think of in terms of how feminism affected the rabbinate?

Deborah Prinz: The very reality of the ordination of women is a direct result of feminism I think that women chose to become rabbis in the early days was a direct result of feminism. I think that some of the issues that have been addressed in our movement in those days in particular, free choice and the idea of gender neutrality in our language and prayer and how we speak about God all of that is directly related to feminism and streams of feminism.

Emily Huebscher: Did gender affect your liturgical choices and sermons?

Deborah Prinz: I use gender neutral language and always have over the years in every congregational setting whether it was at Central whether it was in my \_\_\_\_\_ in Tea Neck or in my 20 years in San Diego, I always modified the language because the books themselves didn't so I did and I did it in a way that did not change what the congregation said because I couldn't control that I just changed what I said. And in terms of sermons and conversations of sermon topics I would say that in the early years I was very conscience of making decisions about the subjects that I would address in terms of the reality that I experienced that people would hear me say what I had to say in a different way so I tried always to addressed something that somebody or people might see as a feminist topic so called I tried to really buttress and make it really, really clear how it was a Jewish issue and a reform issue and it wasn't my personal issue but I sometimes steered away from topics like that or approached them less frequently than I otherwise had done just because I wanted to be about to earn the respect of them hearing me over a long period of time without them stopping listening to me because, oh she only talks about women's things we don't want to hear that, so in order to deepen possibilities and the relationships I might have postponed some of that with time. It was interesting that in my first year at my San Diego congregation they had just changed the language of *ovot to ovot imahot* the year before I got there and when I got there and I don't know that it was that long it might have been four or five, six months or something like that I noticed that people were not singing it they were not participating even though they sang a lot of other things and participated in praying aloud other sections of the Tifilah so it occurred to me that maybe because I was new to the *bima* and also by the way there was also a woman cantor in that particular congregation who had been there for a while before I got there, that this might just be too much for them and they couldn't quite deal with it at that point so oddly enough, it might seem counterintuitive I suggested that we suspend the *avot* and *emahot* text for a little while and reintroduced it a little later on and that worked out just fine. I'm guessing it was probably a year or so. Every time we made a change there was an educational process there was discussion about it and there was teaching about it and there was conversation about it in the religious school as well as with the adults and at services and in an educational settings so absolutely; so when we reintroduced it I don't recall it being an issue at all.

Emily Huebscher: Were you conscious of larger changes in the rabbinate based on women entering it?

Deborah Prinz: I do think that over the years there have been changes in the feel, the culture of the CCAR. When we meet, whether it's a regional meeting or a national convention, I think that you see... obviously there's a lot more women there and there are more children there, and I hear from my male colleague that there's a lot more sensitivity to

the presence of families, openness to families, and I think that's a shift that happened due to women. I do think that along the way there were some men who were somewhat uncomfortable with some of that and felt perhaps a little bit slighted or jealous of some of the attention that was paid to the women because there was a lot of publicity about the ordination of various women and anniversary of ordinations of various women and so I think there is a little bit of frieze about it, a little tension about it on the other hand I would say that so many of our male colleagues have been so incredibly welcoming, supportive, kind, understanding; they have just been incredible, our colleague have been incredible, so I think that the changes have to do with the tone, the openness, the family friendly. I think maybe also a move to a more democratic rabbinate, a less authoritarian rabbinate, a less front and center rabbinate and more open to input to participatory Jewish community. I think that has something to do with the presence of women also.

Emily Huebscher: On the CCAR website you write the paragraph about mentorship, changes in the rabbinate there's more asked of rabbis in terms of organizational and management skills. Do you think that any of those were related to women or just the relation to the times we're in now?

Deborah Prinz: I think that the changes of the expectations that lay people have of their rabbis related to instrumental skills are probably more external to the rabbinate than related to the gender of rabbis I think that all of us struggle with those expectations to some degree or another whether we are men or women. When we run seminars for instance, as we just did our Sheckles One Seminar and Sheckles Two Seminar last week for rabbis to learn more about fundraising in their congregations, we see that the attendance includes lots of men, women also, the men were well represented. I think that they juggle this Jewish, academic, scholarship, Torah-centered rabbinate with the expectations that our lay people have of these more practical areas. And I think it's more about the shifting realities of our American culture than about men and women.

Emily Huebscher: Can you identify some pressures that were unique to you as a pioneer?

Deborah Prinz: I think being a pioneer is a huge pressure. I don't think we understood it, in those days, the first 5 or the first 10 of us, I don't think that we fully understood what we carried on our shoulders or what we sort of assumed on our shoulders anyway, the feeling that if we weren't really professional and we weren't really quality we would ruin it for all the woman to ever come after us the feeling that we had to represent all potential women forever and ever who would ever be on the bima or in a Rabbinic setting we were called on to do things that men in our state, our position in the rabbinate probably would not have been called upon to do. We had to deal with press and media and expectations in a way that was probably different from what other rabbis had to do at that age perhaps. It was huge but did we know it, we were young and foolish, what did we know, we just did it. Clearly women in the rabbinate is established in fact it's quite remarkable how many women there are and we also juggled with organizationally how do we help women progress without separating ourselves from our male colleagues so this whole conversation about the Women's Rabbinical Network and how women should meet and how women can help each other and how we could put forward the issues and challenges that were in some degree unique to women but not loose the partnerships we valued with our male colleagues that was a bit of a dance and we still to some degree live with it. We have these polls come up in our professional development program bridging the gender divide one for women only, raising visibility and amplifying your voice and for

men only balancing gender discussions because while we had to really focus on issues and learn a lot that was really unique to women I think, men felt left out so we wanted to find that balance. A there will be a third conversation about men and women together, lessons which bridge the divide between men and women and how we learn from each other and grow with each other and work together in partnership

Emily Huebscher: Still an issue today?

Deborah Prinz: I think to some degree it still, it may be less obvious but to some degree it is, because in the early day should we form an organization what will they say what should it be how should be organize. Now the Women's Rabbinic Network exists and the remaining issues are what does it do to help colleagues how does it interface with CCAR and what are the remaining issues if any for men and women in the rabbinate.

Emily Huebscher: Move on to the image of the Rabbi. Assumptions as a female rabbi...

Deborah Prinz: People asked me odd questions what are you doing on the *bima*, where's your beard, or ask did you have a relative who's a rabbi and I heard it as you would even think about doing it if you weren't influenced by someone in your family, as if it were an inherited guild kind of thing in your family, not something you would choose to do. In the early days assumptions that we were strident feminist and as I said when we talked about sermons the response to some of the topic that we were out they're only out there to create feminist congregation and only with our feminist agenda, that we were only one issue rabbis.

Emily Huebscher: Article navy-blue suit or goddess, where are you on that continuum.

Deborah Prinz: In the early days most of us were blue suit rabbis we were not how much make up we should be wearing, if we should wear makeup, how bright, how this, how that... it was mostly modeling after a male image maybe there are more goddess type rabbis now I think there is a lot more fluidity about all of that at this point, I don't think you could stereotype r now. People attempted to stereotype back then.

Emily Huebscher: Has your image change?

Deborah Prinz: My comfort level with who I am as a rabbi has changed therefore my appearance and clothing has changed, though I still wear suits in professional settings but I won't always. Did some one report to you in the category of responses and assumption, so you're a rabbi and you're married so what do people call your husband, the great story about the many times that people would ask us, what do people call you husband. Our colleague Gold, husband Lucky, we all picked that up as a great response because we all heard the same question repeatedly. You're married to a Rabbi? What do we call him, lucky he's married to me.

Emily Huebscher: Do you feel that how you shaped your image, did you affect future rabbis? ...how you dress, speak and behave, those physical thing about you, the picture that people have in their head.

Deborah Prinz: I have no idea what people think in their head at this point cause there are so many of us. I do think I thought about it a lot then but I don't think about it so much any more, there is a spectrum of people and look and image. I think the most important piece is a professional image, which has shifted a little bit toward informality. Again, in our program, we just ran a poll about placement, a women expert in communication and image. She mentions that women who wear makeup do better in placement and in their jobs. How we look, the image is important. We want to have a professional look, if we walk around looking schlumpy we don't give the impression that

we take ourselves seriously in our rabbinate. It's important in a different way. Earlier on, people were more focused on women because it was all so new.

Emily Huebscher: How 'about speaking and behaving.

Deborah Prinz: Aside from earlier saying about topics that I chose, I felt that everything I said and everything I did was a reflection for all future rabbis. I had to be as Articulate, clear, prepared from the *bima*, and took special care when I had the opportunity to learn about how to pitch my voice or project. Took the time to make sure I was heard, learned not to speak in a monotonous tone but to vary my speaking voice effectively. So people could hear me in large and small group settings and make my points. Good to spend time on those issues, I tried to. Not easier for men, but as a women felt I needed to.

Emily Huebscher: Did people comment on how you looked, spoke or behaved?

Deborah Prinz: People felt entitled to speak to me about my clothes, your skirt is too short too long, be careful how your skirt looks on the *bima* because you sit, we can see... in one congregation when I first got there at first sisterhood fashion show, they thought it would be a great idea makeover for the rabbi with a special outfit, in retrospect feel stupid or awkward about having said yes, it was a buying into getting to know them and know I was a good sport, but it allowed them to cross boundary to speak about how I dressed. Some areas people take liberties, over the years; maybe they do that with men as well but I don't know that. A family feeling about congregations, and a parental feeling about young rabbis speak to you like they speak to their children. But they wouldn't want you to speak to them like they were your children. Perhaps, license that people felt about women and the opportunity they had to speak about dress or makeup that they may not have shared in other settings, business settings. In the Jewish world, the congregational world, or maybe for women there is a slight shift of the boundaries that may not be appropriate.

Emily Huebscher: Any statements to were totally inappropriate?

Deborah Prinz: I was never totally inappropriate, comments like, where's your beard?, implying you're supposed to be a man. What's inappropriate, it's a spectrum I suppose. I would say, Let's talk Torah let's not talk beard. Someone once said, You'd look better in a bright color. A 11-12 year old asked, why do you always wear black? I'm often on my way to a funeral. It's a spectrum of what's appropriate.

Emily Huebscher: How did being woman facilitate your success?

Deborah Prinz: I do think there was a certain amount of excitement about women in the rabbinate. That meant there was a lot of attention and publicity. Congregations prided themselves on giving women positions, the first in area or this size congregation to have a woman, showing we are liberated, we're with it, and we are where we need to be. Despite the resistance or discomfort people might have felt emotionally about this shift, overtly people were positive, people willing to try it out. So being a woman was an avenue for some level of success. People knew my name because I was one of the first, the fact there was some publicity probably helped. NYT ran an article, and your name was out there in a way that might not have otherwise happened. Being a woman facilitated some exposure and visibility that might not have otherwise happened.

Emily Huebscher: Challenges?

Deborah Prinz: Real challenges, maternity leave issue very difficult at one point, salary equity all the way along the way, probably ageism that might be different for

women than for men, I cannot document that, it's just a suspicion I have, I think that there have been a number of challenges along the way.

Emily Huebscher: Do you know any statistic about salaries?

Deborah Prinz: Statistic about salary, there are salary surveys. I suspect that women have not been in the highest ranges, maybe at the median and maybe under the median. I would have to go back over my own material, but in my personal experience, I have been almost always a little bit under.

Emily Huebscher: Overall experience at a rabbinate, positive or negative?

Deborah Prinz: Great 30 years of teaching and leading worship and being with people in an intergenerational context in life cycles, opportunities were all wonderful and what I do now working with colleagues is really terrific so despite the challenges there have been many great moments and wonderful opportunities.

Emily Huebscher: Problems that you did or didn't anticipate, a big surprise?

Deborah Prinz: I was young, did not really know or understand how complex the rabbinate would be and is, nor did I understand what being a pioneer would mean for me or my women colleagues. Young and naïve, if I understood the challenges along the way on top of doing the work there are the other issues, I didn't know I would have done it if I had had the wisdom but if I had anticipated all the issues if I would have done it. But I might have because I am a first born and I'm very responsible and I think I can do a lot more than I probably should.

Emily Huebscher: Are these the things that helped you succeed as a pioneer?

Deborah Prinz: Who knows? I'm tenacious, I work hard, who knows what makes it possible to succeed. An encouraging family and a husband who also cared about the rabbinate and who gave me opportunities that other men may not have encouraged. My kids who were great about my doing my work and they got it. A whole mix of things.

Emily Huebscher: Greatest success at a rabbi?

Deborah Prinz: Being in the rabbinate for 30 years is a great success. Being in congregational work for 30 years, given the challenges of women in the rabbinate in the very early stages, and having made a contribution in each of the setting where I was, to the growth and vitality of that community and having been able to work in partnership with lay people, and build a congregation programmatically and in some cases numerically and to be able to have also worked with colleagues in my leadership at PAR and now the CCAR has been kind of amazing and wonderful. And more recently to have developed my interest in Jews and chocolate, to be able to reinvent myself toward the end of my career in very different kinds of work, using a different skill set. Researching connection between Jews and chocolate. All of this is just great, wonderful, exciting, I'm proud of it

Emily Huebscher: Female Rabbi to Chocolate Rabbi

Deborah Prinz: They're related.

Emily Huebscher: Advice to general rabbis.

Deborah Prinz: To the degree that I'm comfortable giving advice in such a direct way, encourage rabbis to keep on learning, to stay open, to seek balance that works for you or them in terms of work and real life, remember that the rabbinate is a cherished and sacred profession but it's not who you are and to maintain some perspective about yourself separate from the work that you do and the profession that you live and to find great teachers and great mentors all the way through I think that makes a huge difference and to understand that there are many different forms of rabbinic work and they are all

exciting and wonderful and worth while and one doesn't necessarily have to do one thing for the rest of your life that it's ok to shift and reconsider and re-evaluate and reassess and to try other things, try new things within the rabbinate or not.

Emily Huebscher: Any other things to you want to touch on?

Deborah Prinz: You asked a lot of good questions.

Emily Huebscher: Thanks so much for talking to me.

**Interviewer:** Emily Huebscher, 5<sup>th</sup> year student HUC

**With:** Rabbi Myra Soifer, 1978

**Date:** February 2, 2010

Emily Huebscher: Thanks so much for talking to me.. I wanted to remind you that I'm going to be recording this for the American Jewish Archives. Be frank

Myra Soifer: Never a problem where I'm concerned.

Emily Huebscher: When you first thought about becoming a rabbi.

Myra Soifer: I actually bumped into the rabbinate quite by accident. I was in college and I dropped out, and when I chose to return I was sitting on other end of country from where I went to school and I just picked out a course in religion in the catalogue that looked interesting; it was in Religion and Literature. I did not at that point consider myself to have a religion because while both my parents were Jewish they were highly assimilated so I really had not been raised with much and I didn't know anything about Judaism really, so I took this class and it turned out to be a fabulous academic department and it was also the site of social action on the campus where I was, so I ended up becoming a Religion major which was quite amusing in many ways. But in the course of my studies, I realized even though I didn't think I knew anything Jewish or had much of a Jewish background something was going on there that was bringing a different perspective to materials than others in the class and since I didn't know anything about Judaism and I was like a Junior in college and I didn't know what I would do with my life anyway I decided I better go study Judaism and I was going to be a graduate student in Jewish studies only I was so ignorant and on my behalf there were not so many Judaic Studies Departments in the universe at that point, I ended up thinking that that meant I had to go to rabbinical school. And I actually started out with a catalogue from JTS that was of course neither accepting nor ordaining women at that time and that was the spring right before Sally Priesand was ordained in June. And so... I found my way to an HUC catalogue and there started to be publicity about Sally so the short answer to that story, which can even be longer than I just told it, is that I decided to become a rabbi so that I could learn about Judaism. No sense at all; I realize it makes no sense and it made no sense at the time but anyway, that's what happened.

Emily Huebscher: My thesis is focusing on experience of women in the rabbinate. Questions about Feminism and femininity

Myra Soifer: I am absolutely a feminist, a passionate feminist, and to me feminism in its simplest explanation or definition is simply that, all human beings no matter what their gender be they male or female are entitled to the same rights, responsibilities, privileges, justice, feminism for me is about commitment to equality for men and women.

Emily Huebscher: What role do you think that being a woman played in your rabbinate

Myra Soifer: On the one hand I am a woman so it played everything in my rabbinate because it's a piece of who I am. If you mean... certainly in the early days I know it limited job possibilities. On the one hand it caused some people and some congregations not to want to have anything to do with me and on the other hand in those days we were such a curiosity that people would show up just to see the curiosity. Certainly it's had a great deal to do with my career choices, it certainly it had everything to do with the quality that I demand in my rabbinate from participation to egalitarian language to maybe

choice of sermon topics. Certainly in the early days I was always teaching about women in the bible or in Jewish law, things like that. ...those kinds of specific ways.

Emily Huebscher: Liturgical choices and sermon writing

Myra Soifer: Liturgical choices and things, for instance... at base, the whole thing about egalitarian language which was huge when I first started because the older prayer books were just gender biased all over the place. I would end up preaching a lot on issues that affected women, I would certainly in the liturgy adding female ancestors and all those kinds of... initially it was really language choices and making sure women's names and position in Judaism and contributions and so forth, were articulated. Eventually there was a sort of second level of concerns about a liturgy that was all together hierarchical and later prayers books started to deal a little bit with all that getting away from lord and king not just because they are male but because of the hierarchy that's involved there. Sermon choices as well; when I changed language, initially wherever I went, I had to preach on what I was doing so people would understand why I wasn't reading what was in the prayer book. I would certainly preach on women figures in the text and what might have been their perspective and open up the possibility of different *midrashic* viewpoints that were from women's points of view, and so forth. I always preached about social justice issue too and also they were things that were considered to be more women's issues, I would argue with that but they were certainly high concerns on the feminist agenda when they may not have been on other people's.

Emily Huebscher: How were those [sermon choices] received?

Myra Soifer: Depends, on when and where, in my very first congregation, people were pretty upset at first with the language changes but they got over it. I ever lost a job over it; so I guess it was ok. But you know it was change, it was different for people.

Emily Huebscher: Do you introduce women's rituals

Myra Soifer: Not... from time to time, not on the long-term, on-going kind of basis, so I didn't start *Rosh Chodesh* groups or things like that but I certainly did with individuals and individual situations, and I don't mean individual in terms of private, sometimes that was in the congregation as well, but sometimes when where there were unique situations that for women deserved to have a ritual and they didn't in the past, so yes, but no on-going programmatic kinds of things.

Emily Huebscher: Like what?

Myra Soifer: One that stands out the most, not per se in the congregation, I was traveling with a group to Israel one woman in the group who got her period and her mother wasn't with her, that was the issue, she was traveling with her father, so all the women kind of adopted her and we sort of created this coming of age ritual for her in one of the hotels where we were. So that's one of the thing that stands out the most for me. From time to time *Rosh Chodesh*. I've had situations like divorces and starting over again.

Emily Huebscher: Were you conscious of other choices based on your gender?

Myra Soifer: I was conscious of making virtually every choice in my congregation base on my gender. well in the early days I was, not anymore, everything was about my gender. Everything from what I did liturgically, to what I taught, to what I preached, to what I wore, to where I went or didn't go, to how I responded to people, what I did in counseling situations, everything.

Emily Huebscher: Pioneer

- Myra Soifer: All of those, from what I wore, to what I said, to where I went, to what I preached.
- Emily Huebscher: Have they changed over the years?
- Myra Soifer: Oh yes, sure, once I got to Reno, and I was in my congregation here for over 25 years, so none of those things are issues anymore and they fairly quickly were not, here. I was out 6 years by then.
- Emily Huebscher: Were you conscious of the changes occurring in the rabbinate as a whole with the introduction of women?
- Myra Soifer: Do you mean inclusion of women?
- Sure, absolutely. Because; I was involved in all of those, pretty much. In terms of there were more women out there; there were changes in terms of placement there were changes in terms of maternity leave there were changes in terms of acceptance there was more and more knowledge about women in Judaism. The whole thing had changed, the prayer books were changing, the language of the liturgy was changing, there was a whole feminist theological change going on, some of it was institutional was of it was in the congregations the Women's Rabbinic Network was formed.
- Emily Huebscher: What responsibility do you think that women had for the major changes.
- Myra Soifer: I think we were pretty much in front for all of them. It was our primary issues so we were facing it. I think also in the course of all of this, certainly even the notion of success in the rabbinate changed radically and I think women were in the center of all of that, either women or our allies who had been colleagues of ours in school, largely, it used to be the notion that you got out and you marched up the ladder to a \_\_\_\_\_ congregation and that was the measure of success. Women were making different choices and allowing men to make different choices work as well. So it wasn't a given that you had to strive to be in a \_\_\_\_\_ congregation and work 90 hours a week and never see your family and I think that that change was certainly driven by women in the rabbinate. Different senses of the liturgy, changes in the prayer book. I mean the last prayer book the editor was a woman, so. The WRN was, and continues to, actively advocate for some of those changes as well.
- Emily Huebscher: Image, small aspects, navy blue suit, similar to a male, goddess where on continuum.
- Myra Soifer: I don't accept those ends of the pole; which may mean that I'm placing myself in the middle on the continuum. I was certainly of necessity a navy-blue suit rabbi. Certainly when I started out, there was no choice. But I never understood that to mean that I was aping the male model. I only understood that to mean I was just wearing the blue suit so I could get about the business of what really mattered so people wouldn't worry about my clothes. I'm certainly not the goddess thing by any stretch. I guess I'm closer to the navy-blue suit end, but I don't actually accept that as a category.
- Emily Huebscher: How would you define the spectrum?
- Myra Soifer: I wouldn't even do a spectrum I think that especially talking for the first batch of us, everybody had to find her own way and we all did it differently. I don't think it lends itself to that kind of stuff but maybe for academic contemplation, that's useful. It's only useful to me to say I don't think it works.
- Emily Huebscher: Model after other female professionals or rabbinical men?
- Myra Soifer: You mean other professional women who weren't in the rabbinate.

Emily Huebscher: Yes, in the professional world.

Myra Soifer: No I don't think I did either of those. My colleagues were men so I was learning from men and there were only rabbi models out there. Other female professionals were somewhat helpful and they were allies but the professions are different enough that that didn't always help. I suppose there was so input from all of those. But then I just think I did it the way I had to do it. After taking all that into account, I probably had more input from male colleagues, they were my immediate peer group, but I don't think that I modeled myself after them. I don't think I did.

Emily Huebscher: Challenged in ways you choose your speech, or the way that you acted. What challenges did you face?

Myra Soifer: I started out in New Orleans which was a very proper blue suit kind of a place and what I wore, what I said, what I did was constantly under scrutiny because I was a novelty. I made a choice early on that those kinds of superficial things, in spite of the fact that I am actually a blue jeans and sneakers person, I was not going to be because if people were going to deal with me on things that mattered and it was not going to be on what I wore, so I did the blue suit deal to the teeth and nobody could ever fault me for how I looked when I went out or how I behaved all that kind of stuff so it had a huge impact on me but I thought there were things that mattered more and that's what people were going to have to deal with me.

Emily Huebscher: Stories about people commenting on the way that you looked?

Myra Soifer: A gazillion of . For years, the standard thing, that was after a funeral, after a service, it didn't matter what oh that was an absolutely gorgeous eulogy you did and by the way I like what you're doing with your eye makeup. That kind of thing was constant. One of my favorite stories, I think that at the very beginning of my career, I was a brand new rabbi in this congregation in New Orleans and there was a long hallway went out into the lobby in front of sanctuary. In those days we wore robes, it was a Classical Reform congregation, and I had on my robe, and I could never decide should the shirt collar be in or out and I had it one way or the other, I can't remember, and as I was walking down the hallway the rabbi's wife stopped in and put it in the other position and as I got further down the hallway the president of the sisterhood stopped me and put it in the other position. They were like changing my collar as I went. So I mean that's just one little thing I remember. But the first three years of my rabbinate I do not go out of the house in jeans, not even to youth group, which is ridiculous because I live in jeans, I'm a jeans person. I just didn't do it. Nobody was ever going to fault me on what I wore. If they were going to have issue with me it was going to be about stuff that matters.

Emily Huebscher: Rabbi Gold said that you had some great stories about clothes.

Myra Soifer: We did a retrospect, a song and dance thing, at the WRN for over the decades and I wrote the piece about clothes, it was pretty hilarious that's my favorite. I used to wear these gorgeous Evan Picone suits, and they were skirt suits, so I never was in pants, I'm never in skirts now just for the record, but at that point I was never in pants and one time they were brown, they were blue, they were black. One time I bought one that was a gorgeous light violet color and there was this major issue that I did that. And then I came to Reno where they don't care, but I still had this in my head, and one night it got really, really, cold, and I thought, this is crazy, so I wore a pants suit which was just like the skirted suits I always wore and I thought the world was going to fall apart, and they said oh,

is that a new suit, that's a nice suit, and I thought hello; you can be done with that now. It was constantly about clothes and hairstyle and make-up; it was just silly.

Emily Huebscher: Inappropriate comments

Myra Soifer: I thought messing with my caller and caring about my eye make up was inappropriate quite frankly, I don't remember anybody ever saying you look too \_\_\_\_ in that, but I don't think so; but I didn't give them a chance.

Emily Huebscher: Pioneer shaped the physical image of what future female rabbis would look like

Myra Soifer: Yeah I imagine, but people have to do it their own way and I think people still do it their own way, but I don't know how we could have not had. But then there really are different styles, disregarding that dichotomy you set up before notwithstanding, some people still do (I do) the suit thing and others don't. People dress the way they dress; you have to look somewhere and we were the early batch.

Emily Huebscher: How do you think the picture of the woman rabbi has changed over the course of your rabbinate.

Myra Soifer: Because there's more of us the picture is far more multifaceted in terms what we do, where we stand politically, how we choose to do what we do, what we look like when we do it, There are just so many of us now. The options much broader although, I have to say it still is the case, when we get together somebody will say that somebody had an issue with something they wore at some point. The changes are huge and sometimes it seems they're none at all.

Emily Huebscher: What assumptions were made about you as a female rabbi?

Myra Soifer: Initially it was absolutely clear to me that the assumption was that I couldn't do it. People would show up when I first started out literally to see me fail and it was clear that that's what they were doing there. It was my job to prove them wrong. The assumption of course that women just got into the rabbinate to snag a husband. Initially not so. And then there were some positive ones too, I suppose. Although mostly they were pretty not so. Assumptions, and this is both positive and negative, that we'd be the ones to do the religious school, we'd be the ones to deal with the kids, all those kinds of women's jobs. There was an assumption about more compassionate and understanding that we might have that men maybe didn't get \_\_\_\_ to have.

Emily Huebscher: Do you know if publication that you wrote about clothing is available.

Myra Soifer: It's not a publication it was a show that we put on. It might be in my computer somewhere. Unfortunately nobody video taped it, because it was hilarious. I'm wrong, you might check with someone at the WRN they did a program of it, I think. I don't remember for sure. I wouldn't have everything in it but it might have some of it. Somewhere I've probably got the script.

Emily Huebscher: For the last section professional realities greatest success as a rabbi.

Myra Soifer: 25 years in my congregation at Temple Sinai in Reno yielded all of the greatest successes I think. Touching people's lives and being involved with them at their most intimate moments are far and away the most successes without any qualification. But I was in a congregation for 25 years happy both on my part and on their part, we doubled the size of the facility, a congregation in Reno, Nevada that's dynamic, fabulous, and wonderful not all of which is my doing but some of which I'm happy to take credit for. So all of that and the last success of my congregational rabbinate at least, will be and seems to be being the success of my successor.

Emily Huebscher: How did being a woman facilitate your success.

Myra Soifer: I don't know that being a woman facilitated my success aside from the fact that being a woman is who I am and who I am is what facilitated my success and when I didn't succeed. So I don't really know how to go at that.

Emily Huebscher: How did being a woman didn't facilitate your success.

Myra Soifer: Early day jobs denied me and assumptions that were horrible, there were horror stories in the early days, student congregations and congregations that didn't want to even want to talk to me, things like that. That makes it hard to succeed when they won't even talk to you.

Emily Huebscher: Were they explicit about that.

Myra Soifer: Yeah, quite. My first student congregation I was told at the end of the year that they loved me, and that my sermons were great and I was fabulous and blah blah, on and on, but next year we'd feel more comfortable with a man. We're not having you back.

When I was ordained there were only two congregations that would even talk to me about a position. There was one student congregation that got stuck with me 'cause they had a 5<sup>th</sup> year male who's wife was having a real difficult pregnancy, he couldn't go there for the High Holidays, so they got stuck with 2<sup>nd</sup> year me and the congregation wanted to refuse to have but the college wouldn't give them anybody then so they stuck with me but there were people who declared they were going to walk out.

Emily Huebscher: Challenges

Myra Soifer: Those, and I used to joke that they greatest challenge was being about to see over the lectern; because I'm only 5'1". It was a constant, constant testing ground, with the expectation that I was going to fail. On the other, for me, that works well. That's all I need to hear to make sure that I'll excel, just out of spite. I rather flourish under those kinds of challenges but they were not fun.

Emily Huebscher: More positive or negative?

Myra Soifer: I love the rabbinate I mean there's nothing else in the world I would do, nothing else I would have wanted to do and so it was overwhelmingly positive.; and those were the early days my quarter of a century in Reno has been absolutely magnificent. I love it.

Emily Huebscher: What part do you like the most?

Myra Soifer: Part of what I like is that I like it all. That's part of the joy to me, that it's so many things and I love doing them all. I am always a teacher and I guess in advancing years of my rabbinate, I see myself sort of as always a pastor as well. I love to speak, I love interfaith work, and there's just almost nothing about it that I don't like. And I was in a congregation that didn't have, which is why I stayed for 25 years, the politics and those kinds of pieces that I wouldn't have liked and I just never had to live with them. I've really been blessed.

Emily Huebscher: What about you made you able to succeed.

Myra Soifer: I'm smart and I'm stubborn and very high energy.

Emily Huebscher: Advice

Myra Soifer: Well for anybody if you're going to be a rabbi you really have to love it. Because it is demanding and the hours are excessive at least for a congregational rabbi. I think it really, really has to be your passion. And if it is, it'll be fabulous.

Emily Huebscher:      Thank you so much.

**Interviewer:** Emily Huebscher, 5<sup>th</sup> year student HUC

**With:** Rabbi Susan Talve, 1981

**Date:** February 11, 2010

#### Unrecorded Question

Susan Talve: We did have a voice together, you know I felt that, I felt like we had kind of a little sisterhood thing happening there. You know, I did, I did. And I did feel like the older women, not the older women but the women that came before us really were conscious about blazing the trail for women that were coming after them.

Emily Huebscher: Interesting.

Susan Talve: We didn't have to do all the work.

Emily Huebscher: Yeah, yeah, cool. So I have questions. I just wanted to remind you that I am recording this for the American Jewish Archives.

Susan Talve: Ok. What exactly is your thesis?

Emily Huebscher: It is on the experience of the pioneering women in the rabbinate.

Susan Talve: Oh, ok.

Emily Huebscher: So I have three sections. I am looking at feminism and femininity. I am looking at more of the superficial image of the rabbi, and I am looking at what women perceived their experience was in the rabbinate. But my first question, to start it off is, I want to know when you first thought about becoming a rabbi.

Susan Talve: The first time I thought about ... well the first seed was when I was in college in 1972, actually it was 1973, and Sally had just been ordained, and Betty Friedan came to my university and we were out for coffee after her talk and she looked at my Jewish star and said to me, "What are you going to do, become a rabbi?" You know, like kind of sarcastically. And I said "NO! No way! The last thing I'm going to do is be a token in a patriarchal tradition." I was a religion major, I was a feminist, and I just.... I was glad that women were becoming rabbis because I was very committed to my Jewish identity and to Israel at the time, but the last thing I thought about being was a rabbi.

And then I graduated from college, I worked for a few years in archaeology and I came home because I was going to apply to... I was living in Tunisia, and I was going to apply to rabbinical school, not rabbinical school, I was going to apply to graduate school, and I bumped into Trudy Steinberg, who was Dean Steinberg's wife. Steinberg was a rabbi and the dean in the New York school and he had been my rabbi when I was a little girl. And Trudy asked me what I was doing and I said, "Well, you know, I am applying to graduate school." She said, "You should apply to rabbinical school." And I kind of looked at the program and it was wonderful, I mean, gosh I loved the way the studies looked but I really still wasn't thinking about being a rabbi.

But I did apply, and I had a terrible interview. I had a terrible interview. Someone in my interview in New York, I interviewed in New York, and I don't remember who it was but asked me what I would do if someone in my congregation hit on me. I went, "Oh my God, do you ask men that question?" And I just remember it was so awful and then finally someone asked me if I had a favorite book of English literature. And I had just read *Ivanhoe*, and I just fell in love with *Ivanhoe*, I just loved that book, you know. So we had this only redeeming part of my interview was this wonderful conversation about *Ivanhoe*, and Jewish symbolism

in Ivanhoe, you know. But otherwise it was so horrible. I left the states again and I went back to Tunisia to work in archaeology, and thought that I would go to graduate school in Greek and Roman studies. But I was very interested in the Rabbinic Period, you know, and that is what I had focused on in college, cause I had been digging in Greek and Roman stuff.

And then when I was in Hong Kong visiting a friend of mine I got a response from HUC that I had gotten in. And I went to see a rabbi in Hong Kong. He was at the Sassoon synagogue; I will never forget him. He was a young Moroccan born, London educated, Orthodox rabbi. And I called him up and I said I need to talk to a rabbi, I was so naive, you know. And he invited me for lunch and I told him that I had gotten into rabbinical school and he looked at me like I had six eyes, he looked at me like I was an alien from outer space! And he said, "You can't do such a thing!" And of course that sealed it for me. His response said ooh that was a sign, Susan. Leave all this stuff behind.

So I went back to Tunisia and I never even went home to the States, I went right to Israel. And it was not easy going from Hong Kong to Tunisia to Israel. Cause I had to buy a ticket, you know. I had to explain to the El Al people at the Rome airport what I was going to do in Israel, I was going to rabbinical school, and they so didn't believe me, that they wouldn't sell me a ticket. I had to prove that I was doing what I said I was doing but it was a lot of fun getting to Israel.

And then, its like, oh my God, I look back on it, Emily, and I'm so... it wasn't intentional. I didn't grow up wanting to be a rabbi. I didn't go to Jewish camp. I wasn't in youth group. You know. I did love learning. I never had a Bat Mitzvah. But I did go to confirmation and post confirmation. I was one of those kids that really loved Jewish learning, but, you know, it was all on my own. My parents didn't make me go.

But I, oh my goodness, was I blessed to have been put on that path, because I can't imagine doing anything else with my life, than the blessing that I have had being able to serve in this way. I feel like it was so meant to be, even though it was so not intentional. So, I didn't choose to be a rabbi, it chose me.

Was that too long an answer?

Emily Huebscher: No, no, not at all. So my first section is on feminism and femininity, and my question is do you consider yourself as a feminist, and how do you define feminism?

Susan Talve: Feminism, to me, is including the feminine in the whole. In other words. I do feel that I do see the world differently because of my place on the gender spectrum. You know, I'm in a particular place on the gender spectrum and I believe in order for the world to be whole, and for things to be balanced in the universe, and for us to live without war and without famine, to live in peace, that the whole spectrum of gender consciousness needs to be reflected in all areas of life, including the religious realm, including the political realm, including, you know, all of the realms. There needs to be a balance, and there needs to be the whole of the gender spectrum, so that's what feminism is to me.

You look at nations where men and women really have equal voices... I think they are healthier places. Not that I see it that much, but... in those areas where there is balance, and that's to me what feminism is. Feminism is including feminine consciousness, feminine values into the whole system. It is not women getting to do all the things that men could do before. It's not that, the same way. That always bothered me a little bit, when I would feel that in rabbinical school. That all we were asking for was to do things the same way, and I felt that a lot of times.

I remember doing a paper on... it was just after Susan Brownmiller's book came out, *Women and Rape*<sup>244</sup>. Her study on rape that came out, I guess in the 70's. And I did a study on... I'm trying to remember the text... I could look it up... it was from the... I'll think of it. It was a translation of the text that was a commentary on *if a woman is raped in a field she is to be believed but if a woman is raped in the city she is not to be believed, and it can be considered adultery*. And the reason for that was given that if she screamed in the city someone would have heard her, and give her the benefit of the doubt, and if she screamed in the field maybe nobody would have heard her so you give her the benefit of the doubt, right.

Well, Susan Brownmiller's book showed that women who scream are more likely to be killed. So clearly, the commentators didn't talk to women when they were writing that commentary. You know, it was not a reflection of ... it was a reflection of men's interpretation of women's experience. Had they spoken to women, had they done the research, they would have found that you aren't supposed to scream whether it is the city or the field, you know, if you are being raped, because it is about power. And your rapist is more likely to injure you or kill you, right. So, anyway, I did the translation and my translation was acceptable and I got a good grade on the translation but when I came to my own commentary the response on my paper was "keep your ideas to yourself." You know, it was not appreciated that I was doing a commentary that included more recent research, you know. And I felt dismissed. And I felt like – Uch! Here's a perfect opportunity for me to bring a woman's voice to this experience! Why else have women in rabbinical school, if we're just going to do the same thing? Who needs us?

And that was really a very clear moment for me, because nobody wants to be pigeon-holed. We didn't want to be ... the first women didn't want to be pigeon-holed and just called to talk about women in the rabbinate and all that stuff. We were very careful, you know, we didn't want to be stereotyped and pigeon-holed and have that be the only thing that we would be asked to talk about, right. But at that moment I realized that was my place in history. My place in history was to bring a woman's voice. That feminism, for me, meant bringing the feminine into the seminary and into Jewish experience. And that meant giving Sarah a voice, it meant naming ... I'm sure you talked to ... you can't remember anything when you get my age... Hollander, Vicky Hollander. Did you talk to her?

Emily Huebscher: Not yet.

Susan Talve: Vicky Hollander... I'll never forget, I was in school at the time... wrote her, I guess it must have been her senior sermon on... and it was bold of her because again everybody said, "Oh these women, all they want to talk about is women's stuff." We kind of got slack for that. But Vicky Hollander was very bold, and I was really

<sup>244</sup> Brownmiller, Susan. *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. 1975.

moved by what she did, she gave Noah's wife a name. She calls her Na'amah. She showed the women how important it was that we would use our experience to add the silent women's voices back into midrash, back into the tradition, back into the prayer space. That it wasn't whole, and that if we really were going to be authentic ... you know, men were right to be threatened. Men who loved what they had, they were right to be threatened because it was going to change. It really was going to change the face of Judaism.

I gave a talk last night at Wash U to the LGBTQ community. You know, it is the same thing there. When you include, in a real way, groups that have been marginalized, voices that have not been allowed to be heard, it does transform the paradigm that you are living in. For me, that is what Judaism is all about. It's having the chutzpah to leave narrow places behind and come into the wilderness and dare to dream a new paradigm. We're there to expand and grow and believe in progressive revelation. That's Judaism to me.

I felt like I was privileged to kind of be a part of that. I've been doing it long enough now, you know, 29 years, that I am really comfortable doing it. Because I have had the privilege also of creating my own community. There is a balance here. It is a different kind of community, the core values are different. I'm not saying it's perfect and I'm not saying that we don't have a lot of work to do but because of the inclusion of the feminine, which is feminism, it is a different kind of community. The core values are expanding, they are inclusive. There is more internal imagining of Godliness. We sit more in circles. And these aren't male or female things, these are masculine and feminine values. When they are both reflected create a better balance and a better whole, and a healthier community.

Emily Huebscher: So how would you describe the role that your female-ness played in your rabbinate?

Susan Talve: You know, I can get away with a lot because I am a woman. I can walk into a hospital room and rub cream on someone's hands, because nurses do that and women do that. That touch, that intimacy allowed me a way into healing that I think has been very liberating for my male colleagues. They can do that more now too.

I will say that it did help, I think one thing that I will say is that it was, I am very grateful that I didn't have to do this as a single woman. I think that doors were opened to me because I was a non-flirty married woman. Because I think that the culture wants to dismiss women in many ways. And the way that people do that is through sexual innuendo, and flirting, and so to be a serious non-flirty married woman has always been a very... I recognize how important that is. I'm not sure I could have managed to do all the things I've been able to do if I had to deal with being single.

I understand why nuns are celibate. I do. To serve in this way.

Emily Huebscher: Are there any ways that gender affected your liturgical choices and sermons?

Susan Talve: Oh. Absolutely! Oh my goodness, completely. I see things differently, I feel things differently than many of my male colleagues. Look, I went through childbirth, I'm a mom. I can talk about those things. My style is to share what I am going through, to share my insecurities, to share my failings, to share my fears, to share my doubts, and also to share my faith. That's my style and I think that as a woman I was

allowed to do that. Through the years I have been able to develop that to a point where it is acceptable now. In fact, I think there are certain people who count on that.

I do remember giving a sermon for an ordination at HUC and there were people who really appreciated it and there were professors who could not believe I was talking about a moment with my daughter on a mountain, you know, a mommy moment. That was just not ok, I could see it in their eyes as they sat there, but this is what has made, in my community and I don't think it's for everybody, but as a woman I don't feel like I could have done it authentically any other way.

And I don't mean to pigeon-hole women, to say that that is the only way, but it was very liberating for me to be able to do that. I think I could get away with it because I was a woman, and have the freedom to develop that style as an authentic style. Now I see a lot of people doing it, not that I invented it, but here in St. Louis there weren't many people sharing that kind of style.

Emily Huebscher: Did you introduce any women's rituals in your rabbinate?

Susan Talve: Oh sure, for years we did Rosh Chodesh with just women. I introduced the first women's retreat at Shaare Emeth, it was the very first year I got to Shaare Emeth I think, 1982, we did the first women's retreat, just women, and they're still doing it. They still do it every year.

Not only that, but I remember that first women's retreat there were women there who had cooked all the meals. It was like for some of them it was the first time they had ever been away from their husbands and their children and their families. And they cooked and froze all the meals. Well thirty years later that's not happening. And we do a women's retreat here at CRC too.

Another thing that I started was something called the Ruth group, which is non Jewish women who are connected to Judaism in some way. Empowering them to be a part of the synagogue life. Just like Ruth [was connected to] Naomi, and that's been going on for the last, at least 20 years, maybe longer.

And then also in our liturgy, I've done menstruation rituals, menopause rituals. I think that one of the most important things that I introduced here was rituals for stillborns, and around abortions. We created a whole group called the coat tails group, which was women who needed to talk to other women after they had had an abortion or a miscarriage, or still-born and women who needed to talk to other women who had gone through that. So we created a women's network we called coat tails, a women's group where women could talk to other women about those more silent deaths, the silent experiences, giving a name and ritual to things.

When my mother had her second child, it must have been 56 years ago, and that child only lived 3 days, my mother was not permitted to see that child. They didn't name that child. My mother suffered her whole life of guilt from not holding that child. Now I know in those days they thought they were protecting my mother. They thought that if she saw and held the child she would bond to it and she wouldn't be able to let it go. But it actually worked

exactly the opposite, and had they asked any woman... those were rules that were made by male doctors, by men rabbis, who didn't name babies when they were born. Do you know what Judaism says? Well we know that that's sick, that that's wrong, it's wrong. It's a wrong thing not to name a child. Because you can't let go unless you mourn that child. That child is a wanted child to you. Just because it doesn't live for a week and get a name doesn't mean its not real, doesn't mean you're not bonded to it. I feel really strongly about that one and I don't think that would have happened without women in positions of authority that could say, "this needs to happen."

So we do that, we name. I've been at so many miscarriages, abortions, I've been at still-births. We bury those babies, we recognize those babies as lives and we let them go in a holy way. That is not something that would not have happened without women in positions of authority. I'm not saying its women rabbis but women who could make those rituals happen. I'll bet there were women doing them through the ages but now there is permission, now it is authentic, now it is Jewish.

The other thing is baby namings for girls. I'll never forget when I first came to Shaare Emeth in 1981, the first sermon that I gave, out in this garden area, I remember, was about baby namings for girls. I challenged the congregation. I said, "I know you do big deals for boys, but let's try to make a big deal for a girl too." There was a woman who was pregnant and she said, "If this baby is a girl then we are going to have a baby naming." And we did, we washed her feet, we made a blessing box, all the things that I still do today for little girls, we make a big deal! She had a big party at her house, and it was on the 8<sup>th</sup> day, which I think now is crazy because I did that myself and why do that on the 8<sup>th</sup> day if you don't have to, you're still tired and hurting. But anyway, we did it on the eighth day, we made it a beautiful celebration and I'll never forget Grandma, who was a newspaper reporter, she was like one of the first women newspaper reporters in St. Louis and was pretty well known. She held her little girl, her little granddaughter, and she said, "Shena, you are going to be able to do anything you want and you won't have to do it twice as well because you are a woman like I did." And Grandpa then took the baby and said, "Shena, I was going to tell you to stay home and be a good girl but I see that it's already too late." And, by the way, a few years ago I walked into the ICU at one of the hospitals here and who was the attending doctor? Shena!

So there's like thousands of those stories. Where just being a woman in the right time in the right place you get to do something new that hasn't been done before. A ritual that you see hasn't been done, a time in someone's life that hasn't been acknowledged. Breast cancer is a big deal, not that just women get breast cancer, but it is different for women when they deal with their breasts. There's a lot that we've done around breast cancer, hysterectomies, uniquely female experiences. And how they affect women and recognizing that, had they been men's experiences, there would be rituals around them, Jewish rituals. So we create them, we name them, we recognize them as passages in life that you want to celebrate or you want to acknowledge in some way with your community, if your community is going to be organic. To have an authentic organic community you can't be asked to check any of your identity at the door.

Emily Huebscher: So, what were some of the pressures that were unique to you as a pioneer?

Susan Talve: Well I think finding that balance of talking, whenever you had a chance to talk, talking about women's issues and making sure that people didn't write you off because "uch, here she is, a feminist again." The balance of making sure you are the rabbi to everybody. I think that was a pressure.

I think another pressure on young women was to make sure that you are very clear about your friendliness, that it is never misunderstood. That you can be warm and compassionate and you can be intimate with people without being sexual, and being very clear about those boundaries. Not misusing your power in any way. And being a wonderful model, a role model for both young men and young women that they can have those kind of friendships without having them be sexual. I think is a very important thing. But you have to be very conscious because society doesn't teach you how to do that.

Emily Huebscher: How have the pressures changed over your rabbinate?

Susan Talve: You get old, they change. That's one thing, but I think that as women have been, actually I don't think it's that much better. I think that there is a push back. I teach the 10<sup>th</sup> grade and I don't think these little girls are any more liberated than we were. It's unfortunate and it's sad for me how insecure they are about their own femininity and I talk to them about that.

Emily Huebscher: Were you, in your rabbinate, conscious of changes occurring to the rabbinate as a whole?

Susan Talve: I don't know if I've seen that much change, and it's kind of hard to identify when you are in it.

Here's one thing that I remember being a concern for people. People were always concerned that as women got more and more involved in the clergy, across the board, there would be fewer men that would want to be involved. That has not been my experience. I don't know across the board. Christians would always say the more women that got involved in the clergy, the fewer men would want to be involved. But I don't know if that is true for us or not.

Emily Huebscher: How do you think that the role of the rabbi has changed since women entered the rabbinate?

Susan Talve: I don't think that this has to do with women in the rabbinate actually but I think the role of the rabbi was changing anyway to being more pastoral. Unfortunately, communities need more social work types of things. We end up being counselors and connectors. The synagogue is a place where, when social services are crumbling around us right now, where people come for social services, when they need to be connected to social services on the front line... for the hungry and the homeless and people who are suffering so we find that we are spending more time with that.

I have been drawn into the social justice arena, but I think that's just me. One of my heroes was a male rabbi who always was off marching in Selma when I was a kid. Hopefully we've empowered more women to take... we don't have a sisterhood. The women don't bake the cookies, they don't clean up – the men do that just as much. The men started the dancing at CRC. I always wanted dancing, and it's the men keep the dancing going.

I think if I could say anything, anything that women have done is to liberate the feminine side of men – give permission to men to be more expressive, more emotional, more tender, more

nurturing. I think if anything maybe that's been it ... to recognize that those parts of ourselves are valued and can be expressed in the synagogue in relationship to worship and to learning. It has allowed men who sit on big corporate boards to not treat the synagogue as a business, and recognize its not a business.

Of course, my hope as a feminist is that that then translates back into their corporate world. That they treat people differently there in the corporate world, with childcare issues, with all kinds of issues. That there is a more important line than the bottom line and sometimes it may seem counterintuitive to be more nurturing, more generous, you know, things that are more on the feminine side of the spectrum, to incorporate those into your workplace ends up making a more productive workplace, a more successful place. You know, we don't have any plaques up at our synagogue, that was a rule that I had. We were going to build a building and raise money and there was not going to be any naming, and people said to me, "That's ridiculous, that's not the way Jews do it."

Well I said, "That's the way we do it. No names, no plaques." And we did it. People were so grateful that they gave more. You see the side of people that is more inclusive, you see the side of people that's more on the feminine side of the spectrum, and you create a balance that makes everybody more successful. I see that, bringing feminine values to the Jewish community.

Emily Huebscher: I was wondering what challenges you faced when creating how you looked and spoke and acted as a rabbi.

Susan Talve: I never hid being a woman. I think I tried to be careful about... I didn't ever dress suggestively but I always – I never wanted to wear a suit – I didn't want to pretend that I was a man outside.

I'll never forget when my class was in Cincinnati they brought in someone who had worked for ... there was a movement called "dress for success" – and they brought in someone to talk to the women. And they brought us to one of the department stores in Cincinnati, I don't remember what it was, and we sat there and they told us about not wearing nail polish, and she looked at me and she said, "You're going to have to cut your nails and cut your hair or you'll never get a job." She said, "You've got to wear suits." We all kind of looked at each other because that was just outrageous and we didn't want to have anything to do with that. I think I bought a suit for interviews, but I think that was the only time I wore it.

But I do remember being in my first job and being criticized for not wearing stockings in the summer. I just said, "That's ridiculous. It's 90 degrees outside and I have to go outside. I'm not wearing stockings. That's your problem." There was a line, if somebody thought that that was a problem that was their problem, not mine. I didn't wear tight clothes or I didn't wear short, but there gets to be a line where it is somebody else's problem, if they can't take you seriously because of the way you look.

But I also think that my husband would say that being young, not anymore, but when I was a young, kind of pretty girl that it opened doors for me. But once the door opened you've got to hold your own. And the other thing is, what he doesn't understand, and what most people don't understand about the whole pretty girl thing was that it may open doors but it closes

people's minds to you. People will not... people wanted to write me off all the time, especially in the interfaith community. They would open the door and I got a lot of attention but I really had to work hard to be smart. I had to work hard to hold my own. I had to do my homework. You don't coast on the superficial stuff, it doesn't work. And, if you sell out, you sabotage yourself. You really have to, you have to just be authentic.

Emily Huebscher: Joy Levitt (RRC 81), wrote an article describing two models for women in the rabbinate: Navy Blue Suit, a rabbi who saw herself as the same as a male, and the Goddess, a rabbi who saw herself as the absolute opposite of a male. If that is a continuum, can you place yourself on it?

Susan Talve: I would hope that I am more of a balance. I would hope that I'm me, that I'm just authentically me. Though I will say that I yearn for myself... I yearn for more images of goddess in my own life... in my own spiritual life. Those images of ... Subliminally I think I grew up with so much male god language and male god image that I love it when I see a feminine presence on the bima that is very feminine, that is more goddess like, that is channeling the feminine face of god. I love that. If I can be that for people, it is very humbling. I'm not afraid of that.

But we're all different. We are all on different places of the spectrum and I think that we are all necessary and we are all needed. And the worst thing we can do to each other as women is to judge each other, to say one way is right or wrong, I think they're all necessary. Cause we're all different and we've got to model that. And we're all of different places on the spectrum. If we're going to grow healthy girls and healthy boys and healthy trans-gendered human beings we've got to find a way to accept them all and celebrate them all and help them find their own authentic voice for themselves and not let one be more right or wrong than the other.

I think they are necessary. I needed more feminine, goddess type role models growing up. I looked for it everywhere. I saw it in Mary. I would go to catechism with my friends, to catholic school on Wednesday afternoons. I saw it in that big statue of Mary. I saw it in the nuns who were the principals of the school, I mean, we didn't have any female principals. I didn't think about the celibacy or anything like that and what women had to give up to be nuns but I just thought wow, here are these powerful women! Powerful women, they were women. I looked for that. So if I can provide that for little girls a little bit and awaken that place in them, what a holy thing to do.

Emily Huebscher: Do you have any stories about people commenting the way you looked?

Susan Talve: All the time. All the time. I don't even want to, I can't even, you know, I could write volumes on how many people commented on my hair and my clothes. Oy-oy-oy. It's gotten much better as I've gotten older. I can say that. Oh my God, "Your skirt is too short, your skirt is too long." "Your hair is too long." "Your nose is too long." You name it, I've heard it. Everybody's got a comment.

Emily Huebscher: Any particular ones that stand out?

Susan Talve: Not really. It's just been ... It is part of the package. Its part of what you do, you know, people get over it, they say their thing. Then you don't walk away in a huff, but you engage them at a deeper level and it's not a problem anymore.

Emily Huebscher: Did you have any responses to that?

Susan Talve: Well my response is... my response is to not take it personally. It's a culture thing. I just try not to take it personally.

Emily Huebscher: How do you think the picture of the woman rabbi changed over the course of your rabbinate?

Susan Talve: I think that with more... with the diversity - and the number - have been wonderful because they have really allowed us to be unique and not be forced into any one stereotype. We always said that Sally was the perfect first woman because she was so real, so herself. She walked a very solid path. I think by her role modeling it encouraged all of us to do the same.

Emily Huebscher: As a pioneer woman rabbi to you feel like you were part of the group that shaped the image of the future female rabbi?

Susan Talve: I don't know, I think we are waiting to see. But I do know that I have helped women not make the same mistakes I did, especially around child care issues. I started the day care center in Cincinnati cause there wasn't anything but I wasn't married then and I didn't have children. When it came to my turn there was nobody to start a daycare center for me. I wasn't smart enough to take maternity leave, nobody had ever talked about maternity leave where I was. Now they talk about maternity leave and paternity leave. Women are much smarter today and I think they are building on... I have been very clear about making sure they don't make the same mistakes that I have made.

Emily Huebscher: What assumptions do you think were made about you as a female rabbi?

Susan Talve: Gee, that's a great question. People assumed that I was a bad mother. People assumed that I put my work before my children. People assumed that I was never there for my kids because how could I have been, male rabbis never were. At least that was the assumption. So they put those same assumptions on me and that wasn't true, it really wasn't true. But I still hear it from people. I mean, I hope it wasn't true, you can ask my kids, but I don't think it was true. But I think they think I was there for them.

And my kids had a lot of health problems and I was there for them. My congregation was very, very supportive of me, and that was what made a difference. There wasn't a mommy there for my kids, not that my husband isn't wonderful and a wonderful dad but he needed us both when they were sick and I was the hospital mom, I was the one who did hospitals. There is always one parent that does it better than the other and he took care of a lot of really important things and he's a rabbi too but I was the hospital mom. I got things done in the hospital and I was never going to leave either of my kids when they were sick. I think people assumed that I... cause I was pretty visible and I've done a lot in this community, at least that's the assumption, and I think people wonder how I was able to do everything, and they assume that I was a bad mother.

Emily Huebscher: Some of the other women talked about the assumption that women were just there to meet a rabbinic spouse.

Susan Talve: At rabbinical school? Oh God, I never heard that. I mean. I was so not there for that. God. Gross. I never heard that. And that was so far from my mind. Even if I had heard it I never would have picked it up. I did but that was not by design.

Emily Huebscher: Most of the women who said that they heard that were women who didn't end up meeting their spouse.

Susan Talve: Personally, my greatest success is my kids, they are just wonderful people who I could not do anything without them. And my husband, I have a really wonderful partner in all of this. He's a great partner. The love and the friendship that we have is very sustaining.

I am proud of this community, I am proud that I am able to be part of this community. I want to make sure that it survives me. I believe in the core values that we have come to, and I believe that many of them are there because we have had a balance of the feminine and the masculine. There's a real balance.

Emily Huebscher: What are the ways in which being a woman facilitated your success?

Susan Talve: Well I had a lot of material to work with. I got to tell new stories, I got to dig and find Hagar's voice. I got to dig and find the relationship between Rachel and Leah. I mean, I had a lot of great material to use, a lot of wonderful voices waiting to be heard to be a channel for.

Understanding, from my perspective as a mother, as a woman, some of the texts – I just had so much to work with. And it has been a great joy sharing that in the interfaith community too. People are so hungry for Jewish stories, the Jewish narrative, the liberation narrative. Abraham being willing to sacrifice Ishmael and so he ends up almost sacrificing Isaac as well, that's what happens if we are willing to sacrifice other people's children we will end up sacrificing our own like Pharaoh did.

For me it is all about the next generation, as a mom the source of *rachamim* for me is my womb. That doesn't mean that I think every woman should have babies, I don't, but I think as women we get the womb thing. We get that we are vessels for the next generation and we better leave the world better than we found it. Because that's our job. Our job is to make the world better for the next generation. I think as a woman I have been able to speak that truth with every opportunity. Whether it is in liturgy or in sermons, or teaching. Just the very way we built our building in circles.

Emily Huebscher: What did you feel were the greatest challenges to you as a woman rabbi?

Susan Talve: The greatest challenges? Well I think also the same thing, I think putting my kids first, it's been hard, it's not that it's easy. It's hard having a family and also having a congregation that is your family and really caring about people's lives. At critical times in their lives, you have to be there when somebody is dying, you know, you want to be there. But what if your kid needs you? Sometimes your kids have to understand. And I don't think it is always so bad for them. They recognize, I hope they would say this, that mom... not that she doesn't love them but that she is doing something important for somebody. Those are hard. Those are hard moments because I don't want to make a compromise. I'll never forget Sarika, one history day, got to go to the state-wide history competition. I got to go to part of it but then I had a wedding and I had to come back and I missed the big part of it and I felt so badly but there are things you miss. But in the big picture it balances out, but I didn't always remember that.

Emily Huebscher: What aspect of the rabbinate do you enjoy the most?

Susan Talve: I love worship I love prayer. I do love prayer. Being part of it was well as being a channel for it. I love praying with people. I love the interpersonal connections that I get to make with people at critical times. I love teaching. I just love

teaching. I love teaching how people can use the tradition to transform their lives. I love those teachings that are so relevant to someone's life that they transform them. And I love those moments where you really feel soul. When you get beyond the garment, get through the body, and feel that soul connection with someone.

Emily Huebscher: What is it about you that made you able to succeed as a pioneer woman rabbi?

Susan Talve: I think I have a good work ethic. I think I work hard. I think you have to be able to work hard. You've got to have a good work ethic because nobody tells you, you have got to be telling yourself what to do. So you have to have good work ethic. Be able to listen, and you can't have a big ego. You have to really have it be not about you. The minute that ego gets in the way, the minute that you get in the way, it gets sour.

Emily Huebscher: What advice do you have for future rabbis?

Susan Talve: Make sure you are grounded. Make sure that your relationships, the ones that you'll carry with you through your life, are solid. Don't assume that the people closest to you understand, make sure that those relationships are solid and that those people know you love them and you aren't taking them for granted.

Don't miss any opportunity, it sounds like it should be an either-or but it's an and-and. Don't miss any opportunity to use this tradition to change the world and make it a more whole and a better place, because the tools are there. Be a channel for good. And know that it's not about you.

And get yourself a really good spiritual program. Don't expect other people to pray, or to study or to develop if you don't. Make sure you have solid spiritual practice that works for you. Those are the things I think.

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