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Women's Whispers: Titles Do Not the Rabbi Make

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08/27/2010 16:45

There has been a divine hullabaloo this year about titles given to and withdrawn from women performing rabbinic roles in Orthodox synagogues. I am always willing to launch right into naming debates, as I did regarding my own title before I married a rabbi. But in the case of the women who can't be called rabbi, the battle over what they *should* be called is secondary – nay! tertiary – and masks the tantalizing primary issues.

What might those issues be? Let me begin, and invite you to add to the list: (1) What is a rabbi? (2) What should their educational qualifications be? (3) What should their personal qualities be? (4) What tasks should they be required to perform?

There was a time when a rabbi was a jack-of-all-trades. He needed to know how to slaughter an animal ritually and perform circumcisions, officiate at weddings and funerals, decide matters of law and build a mikve. He also comforted mourners and the sick. Today, it is rare for a rabbi to do a quarter of these things. We have specialist *shohtim*, *mohelim* and mikve construction companies. People who have built internationally recognized expertise in Jewish medical, business or ritual ethics can be accessed 24/6.

So what does the local rabbi do? That depends on what is negotiated between the rabbi and the congregation. All rabbis need an empathetic ear to understand *davar mitoch davar* – the secrets behind people's words. Beyond that, the obligatory tasks diverge. These could encompass counseling estranged couples and doubting teenagers, and making peace between members clashing over the kiddush club. A rabbi certainly has an interest in the financial future of the synagogue; some extend that interest into fund-raising and marketing, running outreach programs and youth minyanim. A rabbi with a scholarly bent spends his time drafting sermons and writing books.

Rabbis often preside at weddings, though some refuse because they can never be sure of the marital or religious status of the couple. Many congregants want a rabbi at the deathbed and funeral of a loved one; rabbis who are *kohanim* might decline because they are not permitted to be in the vicinity of the dead. Some parishioners seek a rabbi's opinion on matters of Jewish law. The rabbi can research the answer himself, or could turn the issue over to the rabbinic listservs. In remote communities, rabbis might be called on to chant the Torah and sing the

prayers, but some wouldn't perform these functions for all the tea in China.

In short, any role a rabbi does not want to take on can be delegated to others. In the age of the Internet and cheap travel, rabbis can be remarkably hands-off in the tasks they find distasteful.

Of the range of rabbinic roles I have outlined, from which are women barred under Jewish law? The starting point in answering that question is Maimonides's ruling forbidding women from being monarchs. But what does "monarch" mean today? Some say all communal offices are closed to women; others say they are only barred from those involving an appointment by a *beit din*.

FOLLOWING THE FORMER interpretation, a woman might not be able to perform the role of legal adviser or even administrative assistant for a congregation. If the latter interpretation is correct, as long as the community invites someone to perform a role for it, that person's authority is legitimately obtained through group consensus.

Are there any rabbinic tasks that Jewish law forbids a woman from performing? I don't think anyone would deny her right to listen attentively and offer wise counsel. Watching vigilantly over the accounts of the congregation and writing grants? That, too, should be acceptable, even if some opinions claim she cannot disburse communal funds. Organizing programs and teaching youth were long ago relegated to the ladies' committees.

If a woman is asked about a matter of Jewish law, *Sefer Hahinuch* (Mitzva 152) permits her to answer it, as long as she is knowledgeable and capable of legal decision-making. This venerable source is accepted by the Hidda (*Birkei Yosef*, *Hoshen Mishpat* 7:12) cited by the monumental compilation *Piskei Tshuva* (*Hoshen Mishpat* 7:5). By extension, these sources should allow a woman to preside over weddings and funerals, even if some opinions require her to delegate the recitation of the marriage benedictions or kaddish.

And as for being a witness or a judge in a conversion, the atmosphere in Orthodox circles is so explosive in these matters that every rabbi is suspicious of the next, whether man, woman or androgynous. Indeed, we may all be gentiles and need not concern ourselves over the rabbi's title!

No mortal can perform every possible task encompassed within the role of rabbi. If we call a woman rabbi *maharat* or *mora rabba* to indicate she cannot be called as a witness or lead the prayers, why not call the priestly rabbi "*harav hakohen*" to indicate his inability to attend funerals? We will need a long list of titles to describe our rabbis' handicaps (the tone-deaf one, long-winded one, etc.).

Whatever we call our spiritual leaders, they will be limited by their training and talents, by their honesty with themselves and their God. Even Moses, who saw God face-to-face – even he had his limits; often he failed. Who can fault him with that cantankerous congregation of his, the Children of Israel?

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