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Non-Halakhic Considerations of Women's Roles and Leadership in Orthodoxy

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On Women's Roles

Nathaniel Helfgot

The following is an edited version of Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot's remarks at the panel, "Women's Leadership Roles" held at the Rabbinical Council of America's convention on Sunday, April 25, 2010. The other panel members were Rabbi Michael Broyde, Rabbi Gidon Rothstein and Dr. Deena Zimmerman. The panel discussion was conceived and moderated by R. Shmuel Hain.

I approach this topic from the following perspective. Women's expanded role is a blessed event in Judaism and in our life-time. Theologically, it is part of the process of God acting in history in the spirit of Rav Abraham Ha-Kohen Kook's perspective on how various movements in history unfold and contribute to the world and its ultimate goals. Many developments bring forth positive ideas and elements even as they present us with tremendous challenges and negative elements as well.

In addition I adhere fully to the Rav Soloveitchik's, *א"י*, famous 14th *Ani-ma'amin* ("I believe") about Torah Judaism being capable of existing in every society and context without having to retreat into a "sect" or something that exists only in the social realities of the ghetto, closed off from the world.

The discussions we are having here are about the proper role of qualified and talented women in fulfilling various clergy-like functions (as they are already doing in a handful of RCA synagogues in various capacities, whatever title they are given). These women are or will be assuming these roles in areas of pastoral counseling, teaching of Torah, responding to halakhic queries, giving of *divrei torah* and *derashot* in various capacities and in some instances engaging in coordinating and directing life-cycle events while remaining

faithful to those limits that *halakhab* sets, e.g. speaking under the *huppah*, reading the *ketubah*, arranging all the technical matters of the siddur *qiddushin* while at the same time recognizing that they may not recite *birkhot eirusin* or *birkhot ha-nissu'im*.)

In our ranks there are minimalists and maximalists on the propriety of these roles and actions. Most of the people who have discussed this issue in print or in e-mails have as a general rule tended not to raise questions about technical halakhic categories, but other more amorphous issues of meta-halakhah, tradition, sociology, tactics, etc.

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My general inclination in these matters is on the side of the maximalists, i.e. in favor of expanding the opportunities for and encouraging talented and qualified women to be able to fulfill their desire to serve the Jewish community and Torah. I believe so for the following five reasons:

1. We often speak at conferences and write in monographs about the significant personnel crisis in recruiting good people, especially outside of the New York City area, to enter the field of Jewish education, the rabbinate, Jewish communal work and the like. To close off possibilities that do not violate halakhic parameters, for more amorphous reasons, is to shoot ourselves in the foot. There are so many talented young women coming up the ranks that we cannot simply ignore this talent pool. At least some of them can contribute mightily to *ahavat ha-Shem* and *harbatsat torah* and serve as role models for our young women and girls and boys.

2. The entry of more women into the various fields of *avodat ha-qodesh* can bring about positive expansion and help in dealing with various parts of our community toward which we are not always as sensitive. Having women more involved may help bring to the fore in our congregational and halakhic discussions issues that we might not have been sensitive to before. A useful analogy here may be to compare our situation to the field of medicine and the impact that the entry of women into the field has had. Before women were involved in the practice of medicine in large numbers, many medical studies simply ignored areas of disease research that women were particularly affected by or did not include women in the sample when testing new medications, etc.

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They were simply not part of the conversation; issues and important data were simply not brought to the fore. In a similar vein, but closer to home, many of us are active supporters of programs like Kollel Eretz Hemdah in Israel that attempt to train *dayyanim* [rabbinical judges] who come from a national religious background. Because of their upbringing, training and world-views, *dayyanim* who have served in the Israeli army and elsewhere have been involved in general Israeli society are likely to have more positive interactions with the general Israeli public. They appreciate their perspectives better than will the *dayyan* trained in *haredi* institutions, who comes from a totally different world. Having women involved in some capacity in a congregational staff can have similar meritorious effects.

3. If indeed we believe that the issues surrounding greater involvement of women in clergy-like roles and functions are not really about formal halakhic limitations, then we run

some serious risks in limiting access. Rav Aharon Soloveitchik, ז"ל, pointed this out on his *pesaq* permitting women to recite *Qaddish*. If halakhically permitted opportunities are nevertheless foreclosed, we run the risk of losing to other endeavors many talented women who could contribute much to the community. Some might even become so alienated as to abandon Orthodoxy altogether.

4. If one maintains fundamentally that inclusion of talented women in various roles in the synagogue is not really prohibited by formal *halakhab*, but stems from more amorphous categories of *minbag* [custom] or *hashqafah* [philosophy] or simply from discomfort with the new, it is necessary to confront seriously the competing values at stake.

A strongly conservative stance on these issues runs the risk of ignoring primary values of Torah and halakhah, such as human dignity (*kevod ha-beriyot*), all persons created in God's image (*tselem Eloqim*), "the Torah's ways are ways of pleasantness" (*derakheba darkei no'am*) doing the right and the just (*ve-asitah ba-yashar ve-baton*) and general moral principles of fairness and justice. In addition, one must take into account other less central, but nonetheless important values such as furthering the spiritual wellbeing of women ("la-asot *nabat ruah le-nashim*") that rabbinic scholars such as Rav Lichtenstein and Rav Sperber have cited in various fora.

If we truly believe (as many do) that the issues here are not explicitly halakhic, then we must look in the mirror and ask ourselves these hard questions about justice, about ethics and about what is the right thing to do. As Rav Lichtenstein has so eloquently written (in an essay in Hebrew) on the sources of ethics:

"The parameters of ethics and morality and its truths have an important role to play in understanding *halakhab* and defining its boundaries. Of course, a Jew must be ready to answer the call "I am

here” if the command “to offer him up” is thrust upon him. However, prior to unsheathing the sword, he is permitted, and even obligated to clarify, to the best of his ability, if indeed this is what actually has been commanded. Is the command so clear-cut and is the collision of values indeed so frontal and unavoidable. To the extent that there is a need and room for halakhic exegesis and this must be clarified, *a sensitive and insightful conscience* (my emphasis—NH) is one of the factors that shape the decision making process. Just as Maimonides in his day, was consciously assisted by a particular metaphysical approach to the world (i.e. Aristotelian thought) in order to plumb the depths of the meaning of Biblical verses, so too one can make use of an ethical perspective in order to understand the content of *halakhab* and to outline its parameters. Clearly this process requires extreme care and responsibility. It must be assured that—and this rooted in deep connection to authentic Torah and religious piety—one is attempting to understand the *halakhab* and not God forbid to distort it.”¹

If the ethical and moral dimension must be part of the deliberation when addressing questions of pure *halakhab*, how much more must they be included in considering areas more related to *hashqafah* and policy!

5. There is a grave danger that excessive conservatism here may impair *kevod ha-Torah* [the dignity of Torah] in the eyes of our own laity and the broader community. In many of the discussions over the years on “women’s issues” some rabbis and writers who viewed expanding women’s roles with a jaundiced eye have often raised questions about motivations and whether the people favoring change were genuinely moved by piety. In recent years I believe this phenomenon has died down. R

Lichtenstein noted a few years ago that he never felt comfortable with those attacks on people and women who pushed for innovations because “what is good for the goose is also good for the gander.” It very easily opens one up to charges about one’s own motivations. Continued rejection of expanded roles for women in the synagogue context without real halakhic grounds can unfortunately lead people to conclusions—that one already hears already in the Modern-

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Orthodox “street”—about rabbis who have discomfort with opening their “guild” to new members, that we are concerned with power, misogyny, and the like. Let me be clear here, I am emphatically not saying that this is the motivation for those who are more conservative, but one opens oneself and institutional Orthodoxy to that kind of attack. This potential, is, I think is very detrimental to the future of Torah and religious Jewish life and is a real and present danger.

Rav Ovadyah Yosef wrote in his responsum on *bat mitzvah* ceremonies (*Yabi’a omer* 6:29) when discussing those opposed to those ceremonies on the grounds that they would give support to Reform and anti-Torah forces by confirming their heterodox practices, it is just the opposite that is true:

But in truth, preventing girls from celebrating bat mitzvah ceremonies strengthens the hand of the sinners in complaining against the sages of Israel and charging that they oppress the daughters of Israel, and discriminate between boys and girls.

1. “*Halakhab ve-balakbim*,” in *Arakbim be-minhan milhamah* (Jerusalem, 1986) pp. 13-24.

“Into the Hands of a Woman”: Three Approaches to Women’s Leadership

Erica Brown

When it comes to the treatment of women’s issues in Orthodoxy, controversy abounds. The heated debates about women and prayer, study, dress and ritual observance often mask genuine confusion about how to integrate societal norms and expectations with traditional halakhic boundaries and conventions. Are we moving too quickly or too slowly? Have we protected and nurtured the dignity of Jewish law on a particular issue? Have we protected and nurtured the dignity of women on a particular halakhic issue? We find the voice of Elijah protesting, “How long will you straddle two fences?” The straddling posture is uncomfortable and ultimately not functional, since with feet on either fence there are no feet on the ground to act and advance.

This discomfort is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in discussions of Orthodoxy and women’s leadership. Many Orthodox women who are leaders in their respective professions are flummoxed by angry synagogue board discussions as to whether or not they are eligible to be presidents of their congregations, to cite only one example of current debate. Some in this controversy are stymied by the prohibition of “*serarah*,” an official leadership role, allowing three words of Maimonides to prevent women from assuming any significant roles of leadership within today’s Jewish community. Others try through the use of elaborate word-plays and definitions to understand not only what the word “*serarah*” means, but also what the position of leadership in question entails and if it thereby constitutes a clash of values. This includes discussions of

whether the position is appointed or elected, how much decision-making the position involves, and who is being led. The nuances and mental gymnastics of this kind of analysis—an earnest struggle to be sure, but one that can seem almost humorous at times. One senses that the forest is being lost for the trees because the leadership of the Jewish community—and particularly the Orthodox community—suffers from the lack of strong, inspiring voices. To eliminate over half of those voices in a sweep only imperils the entire community more. Are not these intricate analyses actually a terrific distraction from thinking about the leadership of our communities? After all, when we think about present national leaders of the Modern Orthodox movement alive today, how many names really come to mind?

Are not these intricate analyses actually a distraction from thinking about the leadership of our communities?

And then, there is the “just do it” camp of women and their male and female supporters. They show rather than tell why women’s leadership in the Jewish community is critical. It is not that this camp is insensitive to halakhic issues; quite the opposite is true. Yet many recognize that time is not on our side and that what we have to lose in terms of institutional change and innovation, role modeling, and competency cannot wait for all the debate to quell.

A Look Back; A Leap Forward

The three positions just outlined are not new. They resonate with far more ancient tremors. We will look back in order to move ahead by visiting two chapters in the Bible that can elucidate this range of approaches. The Torah is filled with colorful characters and, naturally, women are among them. There is no one portrait of a woman held up as a historic model for others to follow or to avoid, but, as with male heroes and scoundrels in the Bible, there is a great deal of latitude in the presentation of action and personality. One book, in particular, offers a range of female leaders and minor characters for our investigation that may shed light on gender perceptions, particularly when it comes to leadership: the Book of Judges. By examining three women individually, we can create three pictures of female roles and their relevance for the issue of female leadership in the Jewish community today. To begin, it is best to study the biblical texts themselves and allow the three women to jump off the ancient page.

*The Torah introduces Deborah
as a prophetess and leader.*

In the first text, we turn to Deborah, who the Torah introduces as a prophetess and leader. We are told that “the Israelites would come to her for decisions” (Judges 4:5).² She is the chief decision-maker at a time of political and military upheaval that generally characterizes the period of the Judges. In the hope of ameliorating the Israelites’ oppressive situation, Deborah approaches Barak, ostensibly the commander of the army (and her husband according to rabbinic thought³) and gives him the task of going to war against King Jabin of Canaan who reigned in Hazor. The king’s army was led by Sisera who, according to the text, had oppressed the Israelites ruthlessly for

twenty years and had access to 900 chariots. She even gives him the skeleton of a strategic plan for victory, but he will only go to battle on one condition, namely that she goes with him. Deborah’s response is telling:

“Very well, I will go with you,” she answered. “However, there will be no glory for you in the course you are taking, for then the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.” So Deborah went with Barak to Kadesh. (Judges 4:9)

Deborah agrees, but at the same time uses this opportunity to castigate Barak for his lack of independence and courage. So unusual is it that a warrior enlists a woman to run the war that people will talk and say that the battle has been won by a woman. Barak offers no reply. What can he possibly say? Deborah has spoken the truth of her day. She merely accompanies Barak, and we assume that Barak was willing to withstand the possible belittling for the sake of security and victory. The military plan that Deborah envisions is successful: “The Lord threw Sisera and all his chariots and army into a panic” (Judges 4:15), and the victory is in the hands of the Israelites.

Only one chapter later, Deborah’s role is commemorated in the Song of Deborah, yet she is called a mother of Israel rather than a military strategist or a commander.⁴ Curiously, we do not see any maternal qualities to her actions in this swath of text. Nevertheless, she is credited with bringing deliverance to the Israelites: “Deliverance ceased, ceased in Israel, till you arose, O Deborah, arose, O mother in Israel!” (Judges 5:7) Barak is mentioned in the song but not lauded.

It appears that Deborah’s initial observation was correct. The war was indeed won at the hands of a woman, but not the woman the reader was led to believe. It was not Deborah who was the military heroine of Judges 4 but, surprisingly, Yael, the wife of Heber the

2. All Bible translations are from the *JPS Hebrew English Tanakh*, second edition (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003).

3. BT *Megillah* 14a.

4. See BT *Pesahim* 66b for a negative, non-literal reading of this statement.

Kenite, a biblical unknown until this moment. Unlike Deborah who created the overall military strategy or at least reported it in the name of God, Yael was on the ground in an unusual one-on-one combat zone, her tent. This location is so significant to the battle that later, in Deborah's song, Yael will be praised through it: "Most blessed of women be Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite. Most blessed of women in tents." (Judges 5:24)

Tales of a Tent Peg

The tent is traditionally the domain of biblical women from the time of Sarah onward. The tent represents the place of a woman's power but also, and the place of a woman's isolation. Sarah is in the tent when three visitors give Abraham the news of her upcoming pregnancy. When the visitors ask where Sarah is, Abraham replies "There, in the tent" (Genesis 18:9), but makes no attempt to fetch her and give her the news that will change her body and her life forever. Rather, Sarah eaves-

It was not Deborah who was the military heroine of Judges 4, but Yael

drops from the tent to find out what they are saying: "Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent, which was behind him" (Genesis 18:10). The text's locating of the tent is yet another way for the Torah to tell us that Sarah was not invited into this intimate discussion about her future. She laughs to herself that what she hears is biologically impossible and then, in an astonishing interaction, God condemns her for her disbelief, but to Abraham. Even in chastisement, she is not spoken to directly. God gets the last word in the narrative: "You did laugh." (Genesis 18:15).

In contrast, Yael uses the safety and intimacy of the tent to present Sisera with an ironic refuge. He will turn into her tent gladly and with relief for the protection it affords not

realizing that it is an invitation to his death. Not only is it the place that is least safe for him, Sisera will be lulled into the illusion of protection by acts of female nurturing associated with women and mothers. In the victory song of Judges 5, it is Deborah who is chief warrior and lauded as mother, but in the actual story it is Yael, who first acts like a mother to Sisera and then, when the ruse has been compelling enough, turns into a vicious warrior in the sanctuary of her tent:

Sisera, meanwhile, had fled on foot to the tent of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was friendship between King Jabin of Hazor and the family of Heber the Kenite. Jael came out to greet Sisera and said to him, "Come in, my lord, come in here, do not be afraid." So he entered her tent and she covered him with a blanket. He said to her, "Please let me have some water for I am thirsty." She opened a skin of milk and gave him some to drink; and she covered him again. He said to her, "Stand at the entrance of the tent. If anybody comes and asks you if there is anybody here say 'No.'" Then Jael wife of Heber took a tent pin and grasped the mallet. When he was fast asleep from exhaustion, she approached him stealthily and drove the pin through his temple till it went down to the ground. Thus he died. Now Barak appeared in pursuit of Sisera. Jael went out to greet him and said, "Come, I will show you the man you are looking for." He went inside with her, and there Sisera was lying dead, with the pin in his temple. (Judges 4:17-22)

The motherly Yael tells Sisera to come in. Do not be afraid. She covers him in a blanket, and when he asks for water she slakes his thirst with the beverage of mothers, a skin of milk. And again, she covers him. Sisera, the ruthless fighter, becomes an infant again, tucked in by a woman and saved from the distress of the battlefield.

But Yael has not finished with the wonders of her tent. She grabs a tent peg, the item used to

stabilize and ground this structure of privacy, and while Sisera is asleep, she mauls him by driving the peg right through his temple and into the ground. The description is gruesome and wrenching, all the more so because we did not expect it. If anyone appears ruthless in this text it is not the warrior Sisera, who ran from the war and betrayed his own soldiers and his reputation for bravery to seek survival for himself. The ruthless one is Yael.

Yael then presents the scene in all its bloody details to Barak. Here is the man you are looking for, as if to say I found him and did your job for you. In Deborah's song, Yael's violence is not questioned. It is praised and exaggerated: "She struck Sisera, crushed his head, smashed and pierced his temple. At her feet he sank, lay still; where he sank, there he lay – destroyed." (Judges 5:26-27)

In a marvelous etching of the scene, the French engraver Gustav Dore shows a triumphant Yael holding up the side of the tent for Barak's inspection. The drapery of her tunic mimics the fold of the tent, suggesting that she and the tent are mysteriously intertwined. Sisera lies still at Yael's feet, covered in an armor that did not protect him. His unused shield rests on a tent wall, capturing the etching's light, highlighting the irony that he let down his guard at the wrong moment. The artist shows a flimsy blanket draped across his writhing middle, the remnant of Yael's supposed care. Yael, an unknown woman with no title other than wife—she is neither the prophetess, nor the warrior, nor the mother, nor the decision-maker associated with Deborah's name—steals the limelight from both Barak *and* Deborah. It is she who best fulfills the descriptions offered of Deborah, forcing the reader to question the role of titles and the expectations they carry.

A Window on the World

There is one more woman in these chapters who requires our attention. At the end of the

song, we find an unusual appearance of another woman, a character so obscure that we do not meet her in the narrative but only in the song: it is Sisera's mother, who offers another window into the life of women of the period by looking out the window. In contrast to Deborah, the mother of all of Israel, Sisera's mother is waiting by the window for her son to return from battle:

Through the window peered Sisera's mother, behind the lattice she whined. "Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why so late the clatter of his wheels?" The wisest of her ladies give answer; she, too, replies to herself: "They must be dividing the spoils they have found: a damsel or two for each man, spoil of dyed cloths for Sisera, spoil of embroidered cloths, a couple of embroidered cloths round every neck as a spoil." (Judges 5:28-30)

Her appearance here is curious. Why does the text offer us this unexpected view of an enemy's mother? What could we possibly learn from this interior perspective?

An unknown woman with no title other than 'wife' steals the limelight from both Barak and Deborah.

The first line of this postscript to battle pulls at our heart strings. Even enemies have mothers who sit anxiously by windows, wondering at the fate of their sons in battle. The text, through its use of mundane details, places us at the center of this tension. The Torah beckons us to wait with her, to look out the window with her and try to hear the clatter of chariot wheels with her, unfortunately knowing what she does not know as she sits in anticipation. The chariot that communicated unstoppable force in Barak's earlier worries is here, at the story's end, its own source of anxiety. Just as our compassion for the other side grows does the text surprise us yet again.

The wisest of this mother's compatriots tells her not to worry. Sisera is taking his time because he is exploiting women, taking a damsel or two for himself and every man. A woman is assuring another woman that her son is fine by pointing out the way in which women are used and abused during wartime. Shamelessly, she suggests, and Sisera's mother absorbs this into her own understating of the situation, that Sisera is busying himself with his sexual needs. Strangely, embroidered cloths are mentioned no less than three times in this short passage as an additional consolation prize, tugging on the women's self-interest in what they have to gain through battle. Sisera's unnamed mother's psychic energy is expended on worry but will be rewarded with fine, embroidered cloths and possibly a few female captives of war to service her son's desires.

Three Models of Leadership

These chapters beg us to contrast not only the specific women depicted but also the characterization of women generally. We find Deborah under a palm tree, Yael inside a tent and Sisera's mother at a window. These are all Mary Cassatt sort of interiors which at first blush communicate powerlessness. But "all of Israel" comes to Deborah's palm tree seeking guidance and advice. Sisera comes to Yael's tent for refuge, and Sisera's mother sits by her window pondering her son's success. Each of these locations explodes with paradox, and it is the paradox of each that invites us to break out of convention and expectation.

We begin with Sisera's mother. As an archetype, she is the enabling female leader. She gains esteem by virtue of her relationship to a famous man, her son. She leans on his reputation in order to create hers. There are many women throughout history who have achieved leadership in this very way. They married well or raised children who brought them pride, popularity and status. Marriage to a man of note or motherhood can offer a woman a platform for influence that she

otherwise would not have had. The wives of influential rabbis or academics, political leaders or wealthy *parnasim* are often cast into important decision-making roles. Yet we see the reliance that such women have through the text of Judges. The passive way that Sisera's mother awaits her son's arrival reminds us that her greatness is only a shadow of his, not her own. She can use this platform positively and earn independent greatness, but its links are always tied one to another.

A woman earns her reward by sending her husband and sons off to the house of study and waiting for them to return.

This narrative also reminds us of a very different text, the statement in B.T. *Brakbot* 17a, that a woman earns her reward by sending her husband and sons off to the house of study and waiting for them to return. This enabling position places a woman at the window in an anticipatory role, albeit a much more positive one than that of Sisera's mother.

The second archetype showcased in these texts is titled female leader, in this case Deborah. The Torah introduces Deborah as a woman of independent accomplishment but also as a woman trapped by acute gender consciousness. She articulates for Barak the consequences of allowing a female to be successful. If women are strong, it *ipso facto* implies that men are weak. Deborah reflects an important social reality of her day. It is true that female leadership, particularly of a military kind in her period, would most likely communicate that there were no men capable of the task. Barak was willing to endure this humiliation for the sake of victory and put aside his own supposed indignity for a greater purpose. Some believe that the general strength of female characters in Judges is the way that the book's author communicated weak leadership in a time of political anarchy. If the Book of Judges is a polemic to institute kingship in the land of

Israel, the presence of strong, militaristic women who defy female stereotypes is yet another technique to push a political agenda.

To relate this to a rabbinic text, we are all familiar by now with the *Mishneh berurah's* position on women saying *Qiddush* that, although it is permissible, it is a *zila milta*, a derogatory act,⁵ because assigning the task to a woman demonstrates that a man could not make *Kiddush* for himself or others. It is the rabbinic equivalent of saying that strong women mean weak men. In other words, both the domains of spiritual leadership and performance of religious rituals are zero-sum games. When one wins, the other must lose.

Spiritual leadership and religious rituals are zero-sum games: When one wins, the other must lose.

In contrast, Yael offers a very different approach to leadership. Hers is a leadership based on doing, not a passive or questioning leadership role. She is the archetype of the active female leader. She gains notoriety not through titles but through action. Her leadership is situational, and she does not use gender consciousness to stake out a position, get a title or make an observation. She has no time for that. She inverts gender consciousness to achieve a desired end. Her victorious moment is not in the saying but in the showing. Here is the man you are looking for. He is lying at my feet.

For an analogy, we turn to the rabbinic tales of Beruria, a woman who sought success in a traditionally male universe. Tradition teaches us that she learned 300 *halakhot* from different rabbis on one day, easily competing with any male scholar of her period.⁶ In fact, she debates the likes of Rabbi Tarfon and even her father, Rabbi Hanina ben Tradyon and emerges victorious. “Beruria has spoken

correctly.”⁷ Like Yael, she inverts the female paradigm. Unlike Yael, we find Beruria in a location typically associated with men, telling off a man for not doing what he is supposed to do in a place where she is not supposed to be.

An Observation

Religious Jewish women have made enormous leaps in the past decades. They have broken the stained glass ceiling in their advancement of once forbidden knowledge. The enabling role presented in *Berakhot* still exists in many Orthodox circles, but within Centrist Orthodoxy it is becoming an increasing norm for women to be going to the *beit midrash* themselves (with an occasional husband waiting by the window for her return).

In terms of the Deborah model of leadership, we find more women assuming positions of leadership that come with accompanying titles, albeit the search for respectable titles for female Orthodox leaders has become itself an object of controversy and confusion. We are slowly—perhaps too slowly—understanding that Judaism is not a zero-sum game in which the success of women comes at the expense of the spiritual weakness of men. Robust, healthy religious communities understand that both knowledgeable men *and* knowledgeable women are necessary as role models for spiritual success and diversity within our communities. And yet, we seem to be essentially still playing Deborah’s game of needing to articulate and examine, analyze and present the cost of having women assume power. We may come to Barak’s conclusion, namely that it is laudatory for a war to be won by a woman, but we still need to say it. It is not natural enough to be assumed that a woman can function successfully in an arena typically associated with men. We have to make a point of it. Write articles about it. Question it. And that itself is a statement of gender inequity.

Then we come to Yael. She had no title other than that of wife. She had a task in front of her

5. *Mishneh berurah*, *Orah hayyim* 271.

6. BT *Pesahim* 62b.

7. See *Tosefta Keilim*, *Bava metsi'a* 1:3 and *Tosefta Keilim*, *Bava gamma* 4:9.

and was the only one to do it. She did not ask anyone's permission. She only showed the result of her work and for it, was praised in her tents and far outside them. Naturally, the rabbis of the Talmud debated Yael's motives and what she actually did, attributing understandable sexual overtones to the text. They arrived at the conclusion that Yael did an "*aveirah li-shemah*," a forbidden act with the right intentions.⁸ This reading assumes that Yael's victory came about by using her female sexual wiles instead of relying upon conventional maternal, innocent incentives that are written into a literal reading of the text.

Too many women wait to be asked to assume leadership roles

I am not suggesting that any woman today keep a tent peg inside her briefcase (although it could come in handy). I *am* suggesting that too many women wait to be asked or invited to assume leadership roles (the wait by the window approach) or assume leadership and then struggle existentially with themselves in the Deborah fashion of leadership. It is hard to advance when we always question our own right to exist as leaders. Of course, there are halakhic issues to contend with, but, as is so often the case, it is not the *halakhab* that is at issue as much as it is purportedly halakhic assumptions about human nature that in reality are nothing more than social norms and

conventions within very particular communities. This raises another difficult conundrum within Orthodoxy today: Who determines what is normative?

All of the discussion, the newspaper articles, the letters to the editor, the analyses and *shi`urim* about what we can or cannot do lead to paralysis. We should do and then show, and others will understand that we can. Yael has no doubts about her plan and executes it with aplomb. She is not boastful. She waits until Barak is in her vicinity to display her handiwork. But she also does not keep her success to herself. She did what had to be done and has been celebrated throughout Jewish history as a result.

We have yet to achieve this level of female leadership in the Orthodox community, a natural and unself-conscious positioning of women in key and critical leadership roles where women are encouraged to succeed not because they are women but because they are competent individuals who have the requisite talents to lead. When that day comes, there will be no more conferences on women and Judaism or journals dedicated to the subject. At that time, our leadership needs, most of which have nothing to do with gender issues, will be addressed together—both the *beit ya`aqov* and the *benei yisra'el*. The victory will then not be in the hands of a man or in the hands of a woman. It will be in the hands of the entire Jewish community—as it was meant to be.

8. BT *Nazir* 23b.

Making a *Simchah* of Maximizing Women's Roles in Orthodoxy

Gidon Rothstein

I have opinions. Many. Yet success in this essay will have little to do with whether I can convince you of the correctness of those opinions. Rather, I hope to shift our perspective from that of deciding right and wrong, agreeing and disagreeing about women's roles in general and in leadership. The more significant question, I find, is whom we include and care about in our discussion. Let me begin with what I hope is a pertinent parallel.

Making Others Comfortable: The Example of Hosting an Event

Suppose a Jew is making a *simchah*, some kind of celebration he or she wants to share with friends and family—a wedding or engagement, a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Being Jews, food will certainly figure prominently in this event. This particular Jew knows of a caterer he or she would like to use, and who is, for that Jew's standards, perfectly conscientious, perfectly acceptable, perfectly kosher. For the sake of the example, we can add that this Jew's halakhic advisor ratifies that opinion. Will s/he use that caterer?

The complicating piece of information is that other Jews question this caterer's reliability, or deny it in full. I submit that the host's calculus will be less about the objective truth than about whom this Jew does or does not care to make maximally comfortable at the affair.

There are, after all, numerous options facing our host. She could simply move forward as she believes right, use the caterer, and put the onus on the guests. Slightly less radically, the

host could use the caterer but provide an alternative, such as airline dinners, from a source that the guests will find more acceptable. Or she can decide to use another caterer, simply for the sake of amity and goodwill.

The more significant question is whom we include and care about in our discussion.

Some of how the host or hostess handles the problem, of course, will depend on who is raising the objection and how serious it is. If a small minority of guests is worried about an arcane issue, the host would more likely use the caterer anyway and accommodate them on the side. On some issues, the host will decide there is a principle at stake and insist on using the caterer even if a larger group of guests object. If many of the guests were anti-Zionists, for example, and object to the caterer's Zionism (or vice versa), I can imagine some hosts insisting on using that caterer.

That most kosher caterers today seek broadly acceptable supervision shows that hosts by and large do not want to have to struggle with these issues; by and large they want all their guests to feel comfortable eating at their events. I write here to urge that a similar set of questions and considerations guide our discussion of women's issues.

Recognizing the Divide

Certainly over the past hundred years, the roles of women in society—and, perforce, in Jewish

society—have changed, and Orthodoxy, as it correctly does, has worked and is working to identify the changes it sees as positive, which may then be incorporated into its members' service of God; those it sees as negative, to be avoided; and those that are more debatable. The answers to these questions are sometimes clear, to the positive or negative, and sometimes murky, with reasonable people disagreeing over how much a social phenomenon fits Jewish standards.

My central claim here is that we should not only be asking ourselves whether *we* think some development or other is correct; we should also be asking ourselves who else's views matter enough to us to include their concerns when deciding whether to take on an innovative practice.

The actions of people and synagogues affect all of us, since they alter the discussion and change the atmosphere around an issue.

Some practices are almost completely private, and there the weight of one's personal perspective—in consultation with a personal halakhic advisor—properly figures more prominently than the mores of the broader community. Let us suppose there was some question about which words to say in one's private prayers—such as, for example, how to mourn Jerusalem in the *Amidah* on *Tishah Be-Av*. Since only God will hear those prayers, it seems the question is largely one of what one's halakhic advisor counsels.

Public Behavior and the Concerns of Maintaining a Sense of Community

When behavior is more public, however, the problems get stickier. Sometimes, those who object to a practice are truly outliers, properly ignored. And that can change over time. A hundred years ago, opponents of Zionism or the establishment of a State of Israel were probably the consensus view within

Orthodoxy, and the decision to identify as a Zionist was a fairly radical one, bound to raise significant opposition. Those who did so anyway had to make an extremely difficult choice, to decide that the issue at hand was so important as to call for breaking with a broad community standard.

To return to our kosher caterer example, one might similarly choose to stand by this questionable caterer as a matter of deep principle. I have heard people complain, for example, about the disappearance of kosher but non-*glatt* meat; I could imagine someone being so upset about the extra cost this imposes on Jews struggling financially that someone would decide to insist on hosting a non-*glatt* affair, to make that point. I am not recommending it, but I can imagine it; I am only stressing that it should be in a situation where the principle is so vital that community and friendship pale in comparison.

For women's issues, to my mind, synagogue practice is always a public matter, since the example set by one synagogue will become fodder for others elsewhere, an acceptable standard that others will seek to emulate. Further, someone's choice to adopt an innovative practice will almost always affect their social interactions with those who oppose those innovations. I have, myself, several times been invited to celebrations where the food was undeniably kosher, but the religious rituals assumed the permissibility of ceremonies I and many other Orthodox Jews did not. The hosts' insistence on moving forward as he or she thought was right came at the cost of forcing some guests to choose between refusing to attend and swallowing their objections for the sake of social pleasantness. The host might be indifferent to having created that tension, but I suspect many such hosts are oblivious to it. It is partially to remind us of those concerns that I write here.

The actions of people and synagogues affect all of us, then, since they alter the discussion, change the atmosphere around an issue. This,

incidentally, is something activists of all stripes explicitly recognize, when they speak of getting a foot in the door here, moving the yardstick there. This also means that the old liberal line about private behavior between consenting adults cannot legitimately apply to synagogue behavior by Jews, since what someone does somewhere necessarily affects those halfway across the world.

Debatable or Not: Types of Change in Orthodoxy

This is not to say that all changes from “what has always been done” are problematic; some are so well-accepted that they really should pose no challenge. For example, women forming a *zimmin*, a confraternity of three who have eaten a meal together, is a practice clearly attested and never objected to in halakhic sources.

While there is slightly more of a question about whether three women should do this even when one or two men are present, there are, again, well-attested sources that declare it not only permissible but proper. For women to decide to take on that practice, and for communal leaders to encourage it, properly creates little worry of whom we are or are not offending, since there is little if any room for legitimate offense at such a practice.

In more debated circumstances, I suggest we differentiate debates of right and wrong from those of “in” or “out.” In the first category are all those arguments where both sides should recognize the legitimacy of the other as a systemically valid option. When rabbis argue over *halakhab*, they generally accept that their disputants on the other side also convey one of the seventy faces of Torah, much as they disagree with it.

There are situations, however, where one side does not merely view the other’s decision as wrong but, instead, denies the other’s systemic legitimacy. The Vilna Gaon did not *disagree* with early Hasidism, he *rejected* it as an option

and felt obligated to do all that he could (little enough, in that instance) to prevent its spread. Within a community where such a question arises, both sides need to consider the cost of pushing it—those who will battle against it need to weigh the communal tension or rift in doing so, and those promoting the idea should properly consider how vital it is to push it, considering the likely consequences.

When I find cause for deep concern, it seems to me to be a clear warning sign.

I fully recognize and accept that some issues will be important enough to move forward even after taking all that into account. But if we are to maintain any sense of communal unity, these instances ought to be few and far between. While we live in a Western world that has gotten in the habit of making this true for every issue—civil rights, abortion rights, and sexual rights chief among them with a growing interest in pushback legislation on those and other issues—the Jewish perspective, it seems to me, is that man-the-barricades emergencies do not come up every decade, let alone every year.

Dangers on the Horizon

To be more specific, I would like to highlight a few areas of personal concern about how the conversation about women’s issues is moving forward in some circles. I stress here that I look to myself not because I feel myself to be the infallible arbiter of what is or is not Orthodoxy, but because I have always sat on the left wing of Orthodoxy. When I find cause for deep concern, it seems *to me* to be a clear warning sign. Obviously, those who disagree with me will not see it that way, but my point is not that I am obviously right, but that if even the *left* (or the former left) comes to feel this way about what is going on, I would hope the hosts of this party would consider looking for a more broadly accepted *hashgahah* before moving forward.

I first question the Orthodoxy of the ideas entertained in some of these conversations and some of the people seen as valid participants. Friends and colleagues in the rabbinate bitterly oppose this line of my reasoning, and I advance it with no pleasure or relish; nonetheless, in more than one context—and not just around women’s issues—it has become clear to me that these conversations are often grounded in ideas and/or host participants who have, from their start, left Orthodoxy.

Stepping Outside of Orthodoxy

Let me start with halakhic issues. I do not have the room here to fully describe the difference between an Orthodox and a non-Orthodox halakhic process—nor do I claim to be able to do so with perfect exactness-- but it should be clear that such a difference exists. After all, Reform and Conservative rabbis and thinkers believe that they too make valid halakhic claims; we Orthodox reject not only their specific ideas, but the underlying assumptions they make about the workings of *halakhab*. In offering ideas about how women’s roles in Orthodoxy might change from the past, I would hope that we would insure that the arguments advanced, and sometimes accepted, be at least legitimately Orthodox halakhic ones.

That an argument cites sources from the Talmud, rishonim, and aharonim is taken to mean that it is an Orthodox halakhic argument; many do not believe this is so.

To argue that point with specific examples would take me too far astray, and would almost always be open to vigorous debate, but that, too, would miss the point. The question is not whether this or that person agrees with me that some halakhic claim is invalid, but how the fact that I and many like me find it to be so affects those interested in that innovation. In some

circles, the fact that an argument cites sources from the Talmud, *rishonim*, and *aharonim* is taken to mean that it is an Orthodox halakhic argument; but we ought to remember that many do not believe this is so, and all those who then follow that conclusion will be, in the eyes of others, following a non-halakhic and non-Orthodox point of view.

I tried to make this argument in a particular instance several years ago, and was prohibited from so doing, since such claims are never accepted by those who like the idea. Once again, right and wrong become less of the issue than our willingness to simply ignore those who see the matter differently than we do.

Participants in the Conversation

In any conversation about where Orthodoxy should go, it seems obvious to me that all the contributors should have to be Orthodox. Of course, non-Orthodox people can have good ideas as well, but we look at those as outside ideas, to be considered more cautiously and accepted more gingerly, than when a fully Orthodox person offers the idea.

I raise that concern because I repeatedly have conversations with influential members of Jewish communities who reject basic premises of Orthodoxy. In private, I have spoken with various people of Jewish communal influence who admit that they do not really believe in God, or in prophecy, or in an Oral Law, or in any form of Divine Providence, or in the Exodus from Egypt.

It is not for me to judge them, nor do I know how God balances their beliefs against the great good they do for the Jewish community and the world; it *is* for me to know that their opinions on how Orthodoxy should move forward are, to some, inherently tainted, since they do not operate within the required parameters of an Orthodox life. And yet, on women’s and other issues, such people are vehement and influential participants.

I use those examples of lack of faith because they are relatively indisputable; I know other prominent members of the conversation with whom I am uncomfortable for reasons that are less clear-cut. My opinion, again, is not important for its own sake, but for what it says about how we are conducting this conversation; if relatively left or center people are uncomfortable with the Orthodoxy of certain thinkers or lay people who are prominent members of the conversation, we have to consider how that affects the reaction to the ideas that come out of that conversation.

In trying to formulate this idea, I note that people with whom I have discussed it have sometimes said to me, “Well, so-and-so is a part of the conversation, and s/he is obviously Orthodox.” This is a line of reasoning I find doubly concerning. First, and more importantly, the issue isn’t whether a particular *subset* of the conversation is undeniably Orthodox; it is whether the *entirety* of the conversation is so, since only that will convince outsiders that the results are Orthodox as well.

Second, and almost as disturbingly, in several of these discussions, people have mentioned names as undeniably Orthodox whose Orthodoxy I know I and many others vigorously deny. That we no longer even know how the other side of a debate experiences an issue is, to me, worrisome as well.

Public Affiliations outside Orthodoxy

The same goes, as far as I understand it and as difficult as it is to say, for those who publicly affiliate outside Orthodoxy. The definition of one’s personal religion is and probably should be highly personal—I have no interest in “checking *tsitsis*,” and no sense that I would do all that well in such a check. At the same time, joining an Orthodox conversation should require at least the personal claim of

Orthodoxy, a claim has always been seen as immediately contradicted by publicly affiliating outside of Orthodoxy.

It was well-understood, at least when I was growing up, that to be the rabbi of a Conservative synagogue did not necessarily say anything about observance—many such rabbis were fully observant, as Orthodox Jews would define it—but clearly did remove that person’s ability to participate as an insider in Orthodox conversations.

Joining an Orthodox conversation should require the personal claim of Orthodoxy

I raise this issue because we today witness several institutions that do not go so far as to identify with Conservative Judaism, but also refuse to define themselves as Orthodox. Nonetheless, these institutions, and their leaders sometimes insist on their right to be part of Orthodox conversations nonetheless. In some cases, it might be argued that the institutions really are Orthodox and the label is left off for public relations reasons. But there are also institutions that have never had any Orthodox connection, that continue to refuse to affiliate with Orthodoxy, and yet whose leadership strive mightily to be respected voices within Orthodoxy.

Again, others can see this issue differently than me; I am used to it and expect it. But in each of the cases I have advanced so far, the decision to continue on the current path stretches the definition of Orthodoxy in ways I personally find untenable, and, as I said before, if I see it that way, there are many others to the right of me. It is not that my view should count for so much, it is that it should signal to those who follow this path nonetheless should be fully aware of the choice they are making in doing so.

Values and Priorities within the Search for Greater Opportunities

Along similar lines, some of the emphases of those seeking to expand women's roles seem to me unfortunate, and to reflect a concern with gender identity rather than maximal opportunities for women. In Western society, the move to improve women's lives and options has for a long time—the pendulum may be swinging back, but it will take time for it to reach Orthodoxy—operated under the rubric of identity, that women should be treated just the same as men.

The search for women's identity to men should never get off the ground in Orthodoxy.

This idea, as stated, is a clearly non-Orthodox one, since the Torah, *halakhab*, and pretty much all of Jewish thought have always assumed that there are significant differences in how the two genders best relate to God. Some of those expressions of difference are distasteful to modern women, and I see the value in carefully scouring tradition to find the most appealing plausible expression of the religion's ideas.

In particular, many of the changes women seek can be comfortably accommodated under the rubric of expanding opportunities. This is not, and should not be, an attempt to be more like men (except where what men do is the only and best way to get closer to God), but to be sure we are aware of all the possibilities for productive religious and spiritual activity, for building the best relationship with God possible for each adult Jew, male, female, or other.

This distinction, to me calls into question some of the focus on clergy roles. The Orthodox left has been host, in the past year, to prominent attempts not only to have women serve in quasi-clergy roles, roles that until now have been restricted to rabbis, but also to

giving those women a title not just that reflects what they do, but that certifies that they are really functioning as rabbis, title notwithstanding.

Function Deserves a Title

I am all in favor of finding appropriate titles to give people the respect they deserve for the functions they fulfill; I think it is important for their own self-image, and for the attitude of those who deal with them. Yet in all of this, there is a line, hard to define, between doing so in the name of insuring that the Jewish community benefits from all the talent in its midst, in the name of maximizing all Jews' abilities to serve God, and in doing so in the name of breaking down barriers, of getting women to be able to be more like men.

Many will deny that this is what they are doing, and I cannot presume to know them better than they know themselves. I can, however, be clear about how these actions seem to me, and the reaction such actions will stimulate in me and in a large group more to the right of me, who feel all that I am saying, and more.

To conclude with the promised opinions: I strongly believe in the importance of the conversation around how to maximize women's roles within Orthodoxy, but think that any such conversation needs clear parameters. To me, those parameters include an insistence on the Orthodoxy of the conversation, in its underlying premises of belief and *halakbic* process, in those welcomed as contributors to the conversation, and in its framing. The search for women's identity to men should never get off the ground in Orthodoxy; the search for maximal opportunities to help women achieve what God and the Torah define as a successful life should continue with all appropriate speed.

At the *simbab* of Jews' living together in harmony, whom do we wish to include? When are we satisfied going our own way, and letting all those who object fend for themselves?

When do we proceed more carefully—and, sometimes, less satisfyingly—in ways that allow for the maximum percentage of Jews to join or, at least, respect the legitimacy of the

options chosen? It is the answer to these questions as I see among the most pressing for the various streams of Orthodoxy today.

Reflections on Five Years of Jewish Leadership

Dina Najman

Five and half years ago, I was privileged to become the *Marta d'Atra* (halakhic authority) of Kehilat Orach Eliezer (KOE). As I reflect on my time as the spiritual leader (the congregation refers to me as *Rosh Kehilah*—“Head of the Congregation”) for KOE, I would like to acknowledge my deep gratitude for the institution that appointed me as their leader. First, for the courage to hire a woman as their *Marta d'Atra*. Second, for the value they have placed upon my service to the *kehillah*. Third, for how the position itself served to develop me professionally and give me hope for the future of *Kelal Yisrael* and the pursuit of *Torat Emet*.

KOE was established upon the foundation of *hesed*. As it had been explained to me many times, the KOE *minyan* began in the home of Rabbi Eliezer Finkelstein, *ז"ל*, who was too infirm to go to a nearby Orthodox *minyan*. In response to this situation, a number of individuals came together to ensure that he would have a *minyan* in his home. The level of halakhic observance, the commitment to acts of *hesed* and the welcoming nature of the community have continued as core values of the *kehillah*.

Throughout its nearly two decades, the members of KOE have understood the importance of creating a community of Jewish men and women dedicated to Torah, *mitsvot* and *Medinat Yisrael*. The welcoming environment which they have established, their support for learning, *tefillah* and service to others, serve as a model for any Jewish institution. KOE's membership recognized that rather than be an obstacle to a community's cohesion or an indication of religious passivity, appointing a communal leader is a necessary and integral part of a vibrant and religiously committed community.

While alternative *minyanim* have demonstrated that *tefillah* and membership organizational involvement can lead to a successful *tefillah* experience, often the necessary spiritual guidance and availability are lacking. There are times in people's lives which necessitate the advice and input of a spiritual leader for halakhic questions and life cycle events. There is definite value for a community to have a specific individual available to aid its members in working through personal and familial problems, existential dilemmas, and even questions related to a biblical narrative or other texts.

The knowledge that the community has appointed and hired a professional to attend to its needs, and the implicit knowledge that this individual has a commitment and dedication to the membership and wider community, fosters a bond which allows for this dialogue. My understanding of the role of a spiritual leader derives from my experience as a member of a number of exceptional communities that have a *Marta d'Atra*. I note that there have been times when members of communities that did not have a spiritual leader in place called on me for halakhic guidance for their community, for personal questions, guidance for various life cycle events, and requested my assistance in selling their *hamets* before *Pesach*. These are the functions of a *Marta d'Atra* that are often unnoticed and unappreciated.

After the retirement and *aliyah* of Rabbi David Weiss Halivni, who helped found the KOE *minyan* and served as the *Marta d'Atra* for many years, the *kehillah* formed a search committee to identify a person who would best meet the needs of the community. The committee began interviewing men who had received *semikbah* from Yeshiva University or Yeshivat Chovevei

Torah. During this process, the *kehillah* began to question whether it was possible to extend the search to women who have spent significant time learning the primary and secondary texts of the Jewish Orthodox tradition. Even though Rabbi Weiss Halivni had already been in Israel for a few years and there had been intermittent transitional rabbinic leaders, the *kehillah* sought his advice. He answered that the search committee could include women who had reached the appropriate level of skill and scholarship

Never during the past five years that I have served as the leader of KOE have I felt compromised due to my gender.

I was recommended to the search committee by Rabbi Dov Lerea and further recommended by some of my rabbinic mentors and colleagues from Yeshiva University, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and Drisha Institute. When I first spoke to KOE's search committee, they made it clear that there were men as well as women being considered for this position. What was exciting to me about this position, and quite frankly what enabled me to accept it, was that the position was available to both men and women who had studied and were proficient in the areas of *halakhab* required for a spiritual leader of a congregation. Given that this was not to be a junior position, they wanted a person who was experienced answering halakhic questions and could fill the role of a *Mara d'Atra*. Therefore, in addition to the formal education, the search committee wanted someone with practical life experience to deal with the various needs of the different constituencies of the community. This is what appealed to me and what I am now thankful for—the opportunity to serve the Jewish community by educating and leading irrespective of gender would allow the empowerment of individuals who could best inspire and teach others. Never, during the past five years that I have served as the leader of KOE have I ever felt compromised in my role

due to my gender. The feedback and devotion of my *kehillah* has inspired me and brought me to places of greater growth and development. I do not take this role for granted. Although there have been women in our *mesorah* who have served in positions of leadership both in communal life and in *yeshivot*, I am fully aware that my appointment as *Marta d'Atra* of KOE has provided me with an opportunity that no Orthodox woman in modern history has been given. I have been given the opportunity not only to serve but to be the leader of an Orthodox community where I am empowered to set the halakhic standards. My position has always been focused on working with the synagogue board, the membership and other Orthodox communities, in order to strengthen a connection to *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu*, to adhere to His Torah and to reinforce commitment to *halakhab*. The position of *Marta d'Atra*, which KOE created, has given strength to other women in learning institutions that there could be professional opportunities in the field of synagogue leadership within Orthodoxy. Furthermore, KOE served as a model for communities to think about possibilities of women serving in communal leadership positions.

On the personal level this position created a venue in which I could actualize my potential and gain a measure of fulfillment which I had not previously had before. This professional path was not something I ever envisioned for myself or thought possible to consider as an Orthodox Jew. No Orthodox institutions of advanced study presented this as a possibility and there were no *kehillot* bold enough to extend such a position of leadership. When I was approached to apply for this position, I had already been teaching Torah and answering halakhic questions in many venues, including scholar in residence speaking engagements and advising *rabbanim* on issues of bioethics and *halakhab*. I therefore felt an intern or assistant position was not appropriate for my level of experience. I recognized that this would be an opportunity to serve the community through

teaching Torah, guiding the membership in the area of *halakhab*, and providing pastoral care. I also understood that it was a unique chance to actualize my potential in the Jewish community.

It is ironic that with all of the fanfare and debate about women in communal leadership roles, it almost never comes up in my day-to-day involvement with my *shul*. My time is occupied by overseeing the *davening* and *leining*, preparing for *haggim*, learning with the community through *gemara* and *halakhab shiurim*, delivering *derashot*, answering *keashrut*, *niddah* and other halakhic questions, life cycle events, counseling members, and working with the Board and lay leadership to sustain the congregation financially and meet the needs of its various constituents. The *kehilah* needs their leader to put her head, heart and soul into all facets of the congregation to enable it to succeed. The pressure of this job is not about gender, it is about finding those extra hours in the day to make sure every person is taken care of, that questions are answered, that the *minyan* gets organized, that the concerns of the *kehilah* are being addressed.

With all of the debate about women in leadership roles, it almost never comes up in my day-to-day involvement with my shul.

One of the disappointments for me was that there were people who had a difficult time acknowledging that this position was within Orthodoxy. Even though it was clear to me and many other Orthodox *rabbanim* that the position was within an Orthodox framework (the synagogue functions in accordance with Orthodox halakhic standards and process), there were individuals who tried to de-legitimize the position and say untrue statements about my position, my congregation and about me personally. Malicious comments on the Internet, often anonymous, are nearly impossible to correct and refute.

I have tremendous gratitude to *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu* for all the *berakhot* given to me in

my life. Hashem has blessed me with a beautiful and an exceptional family. I have always had the support from my parents, parents-in-law, siblings, siblings-in-law, aunts and uncles who have all encouraged and assisted me on this journey. My extraordinary husband, James Licht and I have three remarkable children. I am forever grateful to my loving and devoted husband and children for their tireless efforts in their support of me and my position at KOE.

I have been privileged to have encountered wonderful congregants and built meaningful relationships with them. The membership and, in particular, those who advised and offered wise counsel have immeasurably impacted me both personally and professionally. Through questions, reflections on my *divei Torah* and conversations shared during our meals at our home, our relationships have become richer and mutually supportive.

I am fortunate to have benefited from the vision and courage of others in the advancement of women's torah education and leadership. Rabbi Saul Berman, Blu Greenberg, Rabbanit Chana Henkin, Rav Yehuda Henkin, Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rabbi Dovid Silber, Dr. Haym Soloveitchik, and Rabbi Avi Weiss, to name a few. Today, there are many competent women and men who serve in positions of leadership of educational institutions. These individuals have enabled a tremendous growth in Torah learning. Were it not for the efforts in the last three decades, positions like mine would not be available to Orthodox women. Today, there are women as heads of learning institutions. Thanks to the advancement of women's learning from institutions like Drisha, Nishmat and others, women are prepared to serve in roles of leadership in Jewish communities as well. In addition to the scholarship acquired, women are now able to care for the needs of the Jewish community at the highest level. It is up to the individual *kehillot* to recognize the

positive effect that women can have on their community.

I encourage our communities and institutions to open their communal positions to all those who are proficient in areas of Torah scholarship and *halakhab*. In this way, we will widen the pool of talented and passionate individuals who can inspire an increased commitment to Torah and *Am Yisrael*. Moreover, women and men working as colleagues creates mutual respect that strengthens the quality of the education.

The Ralbag compares Devorah's prophecy to that of *Moshe Rabbeinu*. He explains that Devorah is called *aisbet lapidot* ("woman of the fires") to convey the level of prophecy, such that people would see flames around the place where she would receive prophecy, similar to the Torah's illustration about *Moshe Rabbeinu*. The connection between Devorah and Moshe is evident through many other parallels. In *Parshat Yitro*, we see the entire nation coming to Moshe for judgment. In the Book of Judges, Devorah similarly judges under the palm tree. Moshe and Devorah both compose a *shirah*, a song. The leadership that Devorah

gives to *b'nai yisrael* for forty years parallels the forty years that Moshe leads *b'nai yisrael* in the desert. Their rulings were sought out, accepted and served to unite *am yisrael*. Moshe and Devorah's success is attributed to each one's vision and leadership.

Ultimately, women being empowered and having a legitimate voice only facilitates more leadership and learning within our community. That more people are engaged in Torah observance and learning needs to be seen as an advancement and achievement for *Am Yisrael*. Beyond this is the increased sensitivity and acknowledgement of the various roles that people can play in the community and a heightened sense of respect for one another.

It has been a unique privilege to be a part of Kehilat Orach Eliezer, a religious community that acknowledges that true leadership should be based on skill and not gender. It is with tremendous gratitude and devotion that I serve my *kehilah*. It is my hope that this position at KOE can serve as a model for other institutions to create the possibility for qualified women, as well as men, to serve them.