

May 16, 2004

To the members of Temple Israel, Long Beach:

It is with great anticipation that I look forward to serving as your rabbi over the coming years. Already, we have begun an important and hopefully spiritually fulfilling dialogue about what a shul and a Jewish community should be. One central concern that has been voiced is the role of women in the community. Therefore, I would like to suggest a framework for how I would address this concern.

I would like to stress how important it is for us to address this issue. We should all be concerned that many women and girls are searching for a meaningful and engaging manner in which to participate in their Jewish community. These women find it difficult to be a part of a community where they are often relegated to the role of spectator. Further, Jewish law has always recognized the importance of *kevod haberiyot* (respect for all living creatures), which encompasses the value of human dignity. The rabbis observed that the concern for *kevod haberiyot* can at times even override rabbinic prohibitions! (see e.g. Babylonian Talmud (BT) Berachot 19b, Eruvin 41a, Megillah 3b)

Some would say that anything "new," be it technology, science, or sociology, has no place in Judaism. On that basis, they would say that the new concern about women's role in Judaism should be ignored, or even worse, shunned. Instead, I believe that applying and incorporating the new into our religion is what has kept our religion vibrant. Our religion has a rich tradition of debating and developing the place of women in our society. The Torah records that the daughters of *Tselofchad* successfully challenged the ancient rules of inheritance so that they might be entitled to inherit their father's land (Num. 27). But we must remember that *Moshe Rabbenu* did not simply accept these women's argument as logical. Instead, *Moshe* brought these women's grievance before God. Similarly, we must respond to today's concerns from within the system of Halakha (Jewish Law).

There are many opportunities for women to take on a more active role in Jewish communal life. However, there are some parts of our ritual that I cannot foresee women performing. Though we may lament these limitations, we are bound by halakha. Some would argue that these rules were set by ancient rabbis who lived in a society that thought differently about women. By accepting halakhic constraints, we are not accepting the sociological convictions of the rabbis. We are accepting that the laws created by our rabbis are binding on us as individuals and as a community because we believe that they represent God's law ("You shall act in accordance with all the Torah that they teach you and all the law which they command you, do not stray from that which they tell you to the right or to the left." Deut. 17:11). Our belief in halakha as God's law has perpetuated the Jewish people. To borrow from Achad Ha'am's famous saying about the Sabbath, "more than the Jews kept halakha, halakha has kept the Jews."

There are many opportunities to involve women in our prayer services. I would invite women to participate in the learning activities that are part of our services. Women would be invited to share words of Torah by introducing the Torah and *Haftarah* portions as well as by

giving the *derasha* (sermon). Since these events do not occur during the formal prayer service (i.e. not during the *Amidah* or *Shema*) women would be welcome to present these words from the *Bimah*.

Certain prayers that are read each Shabbat, such as the prayer for the United States and for Israel, can be led by women (in English or in Hebrew as the reader desires). During the High Holidays, when many medieval poems are inserted in the repetition of the *Amidah*, we could have women lead the congregation in these prayers (in English or Hebrew) rather than the *ba'al tefillah* (prayer leader). Depending on the interest, we could also have regular women's prayer groups. When there is a meal in the synagogue on Friday night, and for kiddush on Saturday morning, women would be invited to lead kiddush (see BT Berachot 20b stating that women are obligated to make kiddush, and Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim 271:2 which confirms that this means that women may make kiddush on behalf of men).

A final very important manner in which we can develop women's roles in our synagogue is by inviting women scholars to teach and preach in our synagogue. This can include having weekday lectures, or having a shabbaton with a woman scholar-in-residence. Presenting such programs will go a long way towards recognizing the vital contributions of women to the Torah community. There are many institutions that have women engaged in intensive study of Torah, Talmud, and Halakha. Some of these women serve in synagogues as rabbinic interns. We should consider finding such a person to become a regular contributor to our synagogue and community.

I am not presenting an exhaustive list of every function that a woman may perform according to Halakha. Other rabbinic candidates at Temple Israel have made numerous suggestions, and during the *Shabbat* I spent with the community, I discussed some other avenues that are being explored in the halakhically observant community. I feel that going beyond the suggestions above would be unwise at this juncture for two reasons.

First, even as we develop halachic ways for women to participate in synagogue, there is a grave danger that these changes will be viewed as a community's picking and choosing which rules of Halakha it will follow. This feeling will be prevalent amongst those who question our halakhic commitment, but will also be found amongst those who don't appreciate the nuances of the halakhic system. The perception that we are simply choosing our religion would do great damage to the halakhic system and to our goal of increasing women's roles in halakhic Judaism. Therefore, the recommendations I made above are the options that I believe are most clearly "kosher."

Second, I am concerned for those who will be uncomfortable with the developing role of women in synagogue. Some people will not be used to seeing women participate in the synagogue. They will also see these new practices as a threat to their tradition. The fact that something has not happened in the past does not mean that it cannot happen in the future (see Mishnah Eduyot 2:2). However, we must be sensitive to those who will be uncomfortable with these changes. *Sh'lom bayit* (peace in our homes and in our community) is extremely important. In fact, the rabbis comment that God went as far as to allow God's holy name to be erased in

order to maintain *shalom bayit* (see Leviticus Rabbah 9:9). Similarly, we must move down this path with great caution.

I believe that the above concerns are reasons to proceed with caution. I am hopeful that with time these concerns will diminish as we raise our level of commitment to halakha both as individuals and as a community. By increasing our commitment to Torah law, it will become increasingly clear that the roles we find for women in our synagogue are the result of the deliberations of a halakhically committed community rather than the result of a community simply doing what it wants to. At the same time, those who were uncomfortable with these changes will have become more attuned to them. They will also see that these changes are not an attack on tradition, but a realization of the system of halakha for our time. Halakhic commitment means that our actions should be constrained by halakha, and not by instinctive emotional reaction. As we establish our identity as a halakhically committed community, the role of women in our community will expand naturally towards the outer limits of halakhic permission.

May we all be privileged to increase our observance of mitzvot both on the individual and communal level, and may we all remain committed to creating an increasingly meaningful, respectful, and engaging Jewish experience for all the members of our community.

B'Shalom,
Rabbi Noah Gradofsky