

# Gender and the Rabbinate

**Sally Gottesman:** *How has the gender ratio of your rabbinical school changed over the past decade?*

**Mordecai Schwartz:** While there has been some cyclical flux, JTS seems to continually come back to a balance of sexes that is quite close to 60 percent men, 40 percent women in the rabbinical school. But our commitment to addressing issues of gender and sexual identity goes beyond the numbers. The Jewish Women's Foundation of

heavily female, and some years heavily male. Overall though, the trend has been that there is no trend; the numbers tend to even out.

**Gottesman:** *Do you recruit specifically for a more balanced ratio in terms of students, faculty, and administration?*

**Powers:** A diverse student body and faculty have enhanced our educational experience. RRC is fully committed to admitting the best candidates to our rabbinic program and we would not compromise our standards by admitting less-qualified male applicants in order to create more gender balance. And it would not serve the Jewish people to turn away well-qualified female applicants. We've benefited greatly in all of our recruitment efforts from our long-standing reputation as a fully welcoming environment for all Jews committed to egalitarianism and feminism.

**Schwartz:** We at JTS do actively recruit women and we hope to increase the numbers of women in our rabbinical school. We would not, however, adopt a quota system.

**Panken:** At HUC we're opposed to a quota system; it would imply sacrificing quality students for specific gender counts. As for the administration and faculty, we likewise recruit scholars and leaders who are at the top of their fields, and we work to welcome women who might serve as important female role models to our students, the Reform movement, and the Jewish community at large.

**Alexander:** We now live in a time in Jewish history that demands powerful, bright, articulate, and passionate Jewish religious leaders. Our goal has always been to admit the most qualified candidates.

**Zacharia:** Our students are self-selecting and we do not recruit with gender in mind. Rather, we focus on candidates who are passionate about our program, who identify themselves as, and want to serve the Jewish community through, a pluralistic and transdenominational lens. We also have included transgender students in the mix. So we no longer look at gender through a binary breakdown; this, in fact, begins to make "gender" less important.

**Gottesman:** *Danny Boyarin has said the most important change in the last 100 years is that men and women are studying together. How has this affected either admissions to your school or the school itself?*

**Men and women argue, for the sake of God, differently; they listen and speak to each other in different ways, and they handle themselves differently when their adrenaline starts to kick in.**

New York has funded a project by Dr. Shira D. Epstein (see page 2) of the Davidson School of Jewish Education that is charged with naming the issues and initiating systemic change in the field of Jewish education by focusing Jewish educators on critical, unaddressed needs pertaining to gender.

**Aaron Panken:** With respect to students, HUC has admitted about ten percent more females than males in the last decade. Gender balance has varied over the past few years, but appears to be leveling off at 55:45 now. We expect that future classes will be more balanced genderwise. Of 20 new emerging scholars appointed to the faculty within the past fourteen years, half have been women. Our current chair, Barbara Friedman, is the first woman chair in the history of the board of governors of HUC-JIR. And our president, Rabbi David Ellenson, has inducted more than a dozen leading women philanthropists onto the board of governors during his tenure.

**Amber Powers:** RRC has about fifteen percent more female students than we had ten years ago, five percent more female faculty, 25 percent more women within the administration, and our board has added ten percent more women.

**Sara Zacharia:** Our rabbinical program at Hebrew College has only been in existence for six years, and our classes have maintained close to 50:50 men to women.

**Aaron Alexander:** The Ziegler School has remained mostly steady at about 60 percent men and 40 percent women since it began as a full ordination program. Of course fluctuation occurs; some years we begin with a class that is

Rabbi Aaron Alexander is assistant dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at American Jewish University. Rabbi Aaron Panken, PhD, serves as vice president for Strategic Initiatives at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR). Rabbi Amber Powers is dean of admissions and recruitment and a member of the faculty at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC). Rabbi Mordecai Schwartz is director of admissions at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) of America. Rabbi Sara Zacharia is admissions coordinator and *bet midrash* instructor at the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College. They spoke recently with Sally Gottesman, founder and president of the Eleemosynary Group, which consults to not-for-profit organizations. She is also co-founder and chair of the board of Moving Traditions.

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**Alexander:** We recently brought together the entire student body at the Ziegler School to talk about that question and a similar question — what it means for rabbis-in-training to engage in the study of *machloket*, disagreement, and how that impacts the way in which we speak to people once we leave our seminaries. What we've noticed is that it means something very different for men and women. Men and women argue, for the sake of God, differently; they listen and speak to each other in different ways, and they handle themselves differently when their adrenaline starts to kick in. Men are more comfortable with argument for the sake of argument — meaning, sitting down with the talmudic text and saying: it's not my job to necessarily prove that I'm right, but it's my job to prove that your

argument is wrong. And that often means not really listening to the other side. Women are more interested in the process and the discussion and less so in how the argument concluded. As a rabbinical school, we'd like people to be clearer about what the process of studying *machloket* can do for rabbis in the Jewish world.

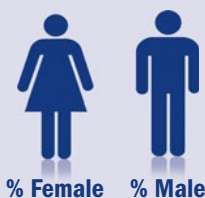
**Zacharia:** It doesn't impact admissions decisions, but rather decisions about curriculum and programming. When students choose their *chevrutah*, sometimes men are studying with men and women are studying with women, or it's all mixed up. Those study pairs become extremely close throughout rabbinical school. We ask our students to change it up, to not choose one person to study with for five years because that wouldn't take advantage of a variety of student learning styles. The *beit midrash* is the center of our program, so students are in the mode of *machloket* a minimum of two hours daily.

**Schwartz:** JTS has changed pretty radically since 1985 when the first woman was ordained. We used to run on a hierarchical, European graduate school model; we're less hierarchical now, more responsive to student needs. It's a warmer place. Is the admission of women to the rabbinical school responsible for that change? I think it probably had a major role in shifting the institutional culture. Boyarin is absolutely right that a major change in Judaism, as it's practiced, is the fact that men and women study together. This is true across the board, and also increasingly within the more liberal elements of Orthodoxy. Keeping women out of the central ritual of rabbinic and Jewish life — of rabbinic Judaism, which is engagement with God through the study of sacred texts — is history. What effect will this have? We don't yet know.

**Panken:** Sally Priesand, the first female rabbi ordained at HUC, acknowledged that the contemporary model of Jewish leadership has moved away from hierarchical leadership to empowering leadership. We must be careful not to be overly essentialist in our approach to the construction of gender. And yet we've seen ramifications of the models of leadership that women have put forth over the past few decades. For example, female scholars who teach in rabbinical seminaries demonstrate that the control of knowledge, the dissemination of knowledge, is not only a male thing. Women can and should be full partners in the creation and dissemination of knowledge. And women have taught us new ways of reading text, new lenses through which we can understand our inherited tradition.

## Current Gender Ratio

in terms of  
students, faculty,  
administration,  
and board



### AJULA/Ziegler School:

	% Female	% Male
Students	40	60
Faculty	40	60
Administration	50	50
Board	45	55

### Hebrew College:

	% Female	% Male
Students	50	50
Faculty	30	70
Advisory Board	16	84

### HUC:

	% Female	% Male
Students	55	45
Faculty	35	65
Administration	35	65
Board	35	65

### JTS:

	% Female	% Male
Students	37	63
Faculty	40	60
Rabbinical Adv. Board	18	81

### RRC:


	% Female	% Male
Students	70	30
Faculty	56	44
Administration	85	15
Board	35	65

**Gottesman:** *At a recent conference on independent minyanim, the following statistic emerged: While women outnumber men in terms of participation, men outnumber women in leadership roles. Do you think that men have to be privileged — that is, leaders with special access — in order to remain part of the community?*

**Panken:** No. And yet we should re-examine the various sorts of leadership roles available to men in the community and assess how changes in our communities are impacting leadership styles. Women have made enormous progress in developing thoughtful models of leadership for this changed world. Men need to begin to thoughtfully craft new answers that turn away from traditional leadership roles that may not work as well.

**Alexander:** We don't believe men need to be privileged or have access to all the traditional power roles in the community. We do need our leadership to think creatively about religious programming so that it not only meets the needs of men and women, but also the elderly, singles, widows and widowers, to name a few. If we give voice and ownership on issues that matter, leadership roles will follow suit.

**Powers:** There is a growing crisis in progressive Jewish life concerning the engagement of boys and men. Many liberal and non-denominational Jewish organizations are struggling to recruit male candidates for a wide range of volunteer and paid roles — staff for camps and Hillel, religious school teachers, congregational lay leaders, post-college internship and fellowship programs. Most of our rabbinical students are products of those environments. We need to do more to actively engage boys and men, which will then increase the number of male candidates for the progressive rabbinate and other Jewish professional roles.

**Zacharia:** Men have had access to these roles throughout history. We must think broadly about sharing the vision of Jewish community, and inviting and encouraging both men and women to enter community through their leadership and participatory roles. I pray that one day the gender of the rabbi or lay leader does not matter — that all that matters is who is best suited for the particular position. 

*The first woman ordained as a rabbi was Regina Joseph in Germany in 1935. Nearly 40 years passed until the Reform movement ordained Sally Priesand; the Reconstructionist movement ordained its first female rabbi in 1974; the Conservative movement in 1985. This edited Roundtable asked the admissions directors of non-Orthodox rabbinical schools about the gender of their applicant pool, about how women and men studying together influence the culture of the schools and rabbinic training; we spoke, hypothetically, about the future.*

*The admissions directors were generally sanguine about the future, yet they are insiders representing their schools. As an institutional outsider, I wonder what trajectory we, the Jewish people, are on. For example, all five directors were dismissive of “quotas” for male and female rabbinical students. I nevertheless ask: For clal Yisrael, should we work to ensure that both men and women are drawn to the rabbinate? Will the gender spectrum of rabbis — male, female, and transgendered — change how we think about the gender(s) of God? I also want to consider what Judaism would look like if the rabbinate were to become a “women’s profession.” After all, it was a men’s profession for thousands of years — and the Judaism we practice is, in part, a result of that leadership. Stay tuned.* —Sally Gottesman

## Rescuing Bar/Bat Mitzvah

ED FEINSTEIN

**M**idrash associates the age of thirteen with four Biblical characters: Abraham was thirteen when he smashed his father’s idols; Jacob and Esau were thirteen when they separated — Jacob to a life of Torah and Esau to the practice of idolatry. Thirteen was the age of Levi when he and his brother Simeon attacked the people of Shechem to avenge their sister. And thirteen was the age at which Bezalel gained the artistic skill to build the *mishkan*.

Each of these associations is deeply suggestive; together, they offer a glimpse of what bar/bat mitzvah might say to a growing teen. They offer a glimpse at how the bar/bat mitzvah rite might be rescued from the spiritual vacuity and deep vulgarity of contemporary practice.

**Abraham:** Bar/bat mitzvah is a time of holy rebellion. By age thirteen many children intuitively grasp that the narcissistic adulthood offered by much of American culture — and

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