

Erev RH Sermon 2018

#GamAni

Rabbi Jonathan Jaffe, Temple Beth El of Northern Westchester

This morning constitutes a joyous event for our community as we gather to welcome not only the Jewish New Year but Cantor Elizabeth Sternlieb as well. We delight in her musical and spiritual leadership and look forward to her influence further permeating our lives.

I want to take this moment of completing our clergy team to speak about an issue that has been on our minds and our national conscience over the past year: the experience of women, especially within the professional work environment. With so many courageous women stepping forward over the past year to speak personally of the ways in which they have been harassed or subject to uncomfortable behaviors and unfair practices, it behooves us to look in the mirror and examine our own practices as a Jewish community. After all, while we might expect our spiritual institutions to stand as beacons of the values we espouse, I humbly admit that the synagogue world sometimes struggles to live up to such ideals. And so I wish to utilize today's convening to speak openly about this issue.

At the outset, I want to recognize the dissonance of this message being delivered by the lone male member of our clergy team. And while I certainly intend to avoid delving into "mansplaining", I also recognize that we male allies are sometimes able to utilize our standing to give voice to our female colleagues. And so after close conversation with Rabbi Linzer, Cantor Sternlieb and other colleagues within our movement, I would like to humbly move forward.

Not so long ago, there was no such thing as a female rabbi or cantor. In fact, there was no such thing as a Bat Mitzvah until 1921, and my generation was really the first in which they became normative in the Reform movement. Sally Priesand became the first American female reform rabbi in 1972, followed by the conservative movement in 1985.

Once the gates were opened, women increasingly entered into the field, constituting a majority of reform rabbinical students by the year 2000 and representing more than two-thirds of total graduates by the time of my ordination in 2007. The demographics run even more extreme for cantors, with classes regularly featuring a greater than 3 to 1 female to male ratio.

And yet two weeks ago, I received a call from a female colleague who is considering leaving the large congregation she serves as an assistant rabbi, in the hope of becoming a senior rabbi elsewhere. This colleague is incredibly intelligent, well-spoken and deeply experienced. She graduated from a top

university. And yet I know that her path will be much more difficult than mine solely because she is a woman.

Why the discrepancy? Let's start with this: consider an average size synagogue, with two clergy members. If both clergy members are male, the synagogue is considered to be "normal", maybe a little "traditional". If one is male and the other female, the synagogue is still normal, or maybe even a little "progressive". But if both clergy are female? Well, it must be a feminist synagogue! To wit, I wonder if any of us here can think of a multi-clergy synagogue staffed only with females. And yet it would be easy to do so with males, despite our increasingly minority status. Furthermore, male clergy have a much easier time ascending to positions of seniority. As of last year, even though more than half the rabbis in associate positions were women, men outnumbered women four to one among senior or solo positions. Like other careers which have become overwhelmingly female oriented like nurses or teachers, the associate rabbi or cantor has largely become the domain of the female clergy person.

Here is an interesting exercise: try to name a female senior rabbi of a large congregation who was hired directly and not promoted from within. In other words, a female senior rabbi who was elected through an open search process. In the year 2018, there are almost none to speak of. For many female rabbis, the position of senior rabbi represents a glass ceiling that can only be broken by spending years at the synagogue first proving yourself and assuaging the congregants' fears that your gender might render you inauthentic. But when a female rabbi enters the open market as an unknown? It is incredibly challenging for her to win the position. Another colleague of mine graduated from Yale and worked diligently through rabbinical school. But when placement came around, she could not find employment anywhere. She searched unsuccessfully for several years. Only after serving as the interim rabbi of a suburban Philadelphia synagogue did the congregants get to know her and eventually elect her their senior rabbi. But without this interim period of trust building, she would not have been considered. I dare say that a male candidate would not have faced such scrutiny.

And so, although women now represent over half the reform rabbinate, they occupy only one fifth of its positions of leadership. And if and when they actually do achieve such institutional parity, they are paid 85% of what their male counterparts earn. The systematic bias against female leaders is even worse in the non-congregational world. A 2015 survey revealed that although 70% of the total workforce in the Jewish nonprofit sector is female, just 17% of the positions of leadership within Jewish Federations nationally are occupied by women. In addition, these women earn on average 59% of their male counterparts.

Allow me to pause and address the elephant in the room. In its 69 year history, Temple Beth El has never employed a female senior rabbi. And with her installation in 2013, Rabbi Linzer became the first ever full time female rabbi employed by our congregation. In the congregation's defense, we have featured at least one female clergy member since Cantor Dana Anesi's installation in 1982, when the idea of a female cantor was still deeply controversial. And when assessing our congregation's failure to elect a female rabbi before Rabbi Linzer, we must note the amazingly low turnover rate of Temple Beth El's rabbis. I am fortunate to serve as only the third senior rabbi of this congregation since 1968. And finally, we should note that the committee seriously considered multiple female candidates in the last senior rabbi search, including a finalist who eventually found placement in a prominent congregation in Seattle. Nevertheless, our congregation will clearly benefit not if but when our first female senior rabbi is named.

Why is this important? Recently published research by Benjamin Knoll of Center College and Cammie Jo Boilen of Georgetown University reveals the impact of the presence of female clergy members to the self-esteem and empowerment of young women. They argue that as children, we imagine ourselves occupying the roles which society models for us. The primary opportunities for young women to witness firsthand females in roles of executive power come from perhaps the female school principal and most often the female clergyperson. There are many women among us today who inhabit lofty professional positions. But our children are seldom present to experience their work. Offering a female rabbi or cantor not only communicates to our children that they can achieve positions of executive leadership but also allows them to witness its execution up close. An all-male clergy team communicates the opposite: that it is the man's position to speak and the woman's to listen. And so Knoll and Boilen reveal that a gender gap in psychological and economic empowerment remains a constant among those whose religious congregational leaders growing up were exclusively men. In other words, it's not just politically correct to feature women on the pulpit. Failing to do so actually impairs our daughters from developing into the women they can one day become.

We can see the corrosive effect of failing to offer examples of female empowerment in today's haftarah. We read the story of a woman named Chana, who struggles with infertility. Passionate and determined, Chana travels to the temple in Jerusalem to beseech God directly. There is only one problem - until now, no woman has ever done this. The Torah recounts stories of women asking their husbands to pray on their behalf. But Chana is the first to break this mold and to make her own petition. When the priest Eli observes Chana fervently praying, he assumes she must be drunk and scolds her for her lewd conduct. After all, it is beyond his imagination that this is something a woman can do on her own. Once Eli comprehends the situation, he apologizes and seeks to support Chana. She therefore

establishes a precedent which allows for women to act independently, something which is sorely missed in today's Torah portion, in which Sara is noticeably absent from the near death of her son Isaac at the hands of her husband Abraham. The juxtaposition of the Torah and Haftarah present a before-and-after view of what happens when society affords examples of leadership for women alongside men. Chana opens a door which her ancestor Sara could only wished to have entered. It is noticeable that when the Talmud establishes the structure of Jewish prayer in which we participate today, it is Chana who emerges as its paradigm for both men and women. We pray today according to the trail blazed by Chana.

And yet many well intentioned and otherwise progressive people still carry an internal and often unconscious bias against female clergy members. Two months ago, Rabbi Linzer and I co-officiated at a funeral for a beloved member of our congregation. As both of us maintained a close relationship with the deceased, Rabbi Linzer delivered the main eulogy and I followed with a shorter one. At the cemetery, a mourner approached both me and Rabbi Linzer. She first thanked me, the "rabbi" and then turned to Rabbi Linzer and said, "Oh yes, and thanks also to you. You know, when you got up to speak, I turned to my friend and said, "That must be the president of the sisterhood, because she speaks so well!" I can only imagine that this well intentioned mourner was raised in a community in which models of female religious leadership were lacking. And while this example might be noteworthy, such assumptions are altogether normal in the synagogue world and yes, are often communicated by women as well. I cannot tell you how many times Rabbi Linzer and I have been present in a meeting in which I get called Rabbi and she gets called Maura. For many of us, it's second nature.

Our female colleagues in other reform synagogues tell many of the same stories. Maybe it's the congregant who meets the female rabbi and asks them where the actual rabbi is. Maybe it's the congregant who doesn't want the female rabbi to preside over their child's bar or bat mitzvah or their loved one's funeral, because such a milestone event requires a "real" rabbi. Maybe it's the congregant who tells the female clergy that she is "too cute" to be a rabbi. The fact is that my female colleagues are often subject to belittling or dismissive comments. And we are guilty of this at Temple Beth El as well.

Beyond hierarchical glass ceilings and unequal pay scales, perhaps the most problematic issue permeating congregational life is the institutionalized harassment and objectification of female clergy members. Even over my own brief tenure here at Beth El, our female clergy have been subject to comments on their looks and attire. A congregant suggested to one of our clergy members that she was too pretty to work in a synagogue. One congregant went so far as to joke that the clergy person should join in a tryst. And so on. I will say that when we decided collectively to move away from wearing robes

at the high holy days, one concern voiced by our female clergy was how their outfits would be judged by the congregation. And I fully understand this fear.

I am happy to report that in response to the issues laid out today, the Central Conference of American Rabbis has recently announced the formation of a Task Force on the Experience of Women in the Rabbinate, aimed towards addressing the reality of life in the rabbinate as experienced by women rabbis, including gender-based bias, inappropriate comments, sexual harassment and assault, lack of proper institutional support, undermining behavior, and issues related to contracts, pay equity and parental leave.

But while our movement considers constructive steps towards true gender equality within synagogue life, we are compelled by the spirit of the high holy days to turn inward and make our own teshuva. My rabbinic colleague Kari Hofmaister Tuling of Congregation Kol Haverim in Glastonbury, Connecticut authored a list of suggestions for congregational life. Having built upon this, I am hoping that we all might consider the following five steps in the new year:

First, please refer to any member of our clergy as Rabbi or Cantor regardless of how cute or young or approachable or bubbly or fun he or she is.

Second, and on a similar note, please refrain from commenting on the physical appearance or fashion choices of our clergy members. Yes, I recognize the stereotype of the rabbi as the elderly, bearded male and that you mean to comment positively on the deviation from this standard. But this image no longer applies, and pointing out such physical traits only helps to reinforce outdated archetypes. I understand that you mean the best when you say, "If rabbis and cantors had looked more like you when I was young, I would have gone to synagogue much more often!" But ask yourself if you would say the same to your child's teacher or physician. And then, perhaps compliment the rabbi on her competence instead.

Third, recognize that women have a harder time establishing themselves as executives and experts. To that end, our clergy and staff will avoid participating in any all-male panels or celebrations. When you enter the synagogue on Yom Kippur, you will find our adult education catalog for the coming year. I am proud to say that six of our nine featured lecturers are women. Truth be told, we had scheduled another male academic but then learned that he was under investigation and subsequently terminated from his position at a major Jewish institution for multiple instances of sexual harassment. So we replaced him with a woman.

Fourth, we must continue to offer our female employees equal pay and benefits, including parental leave as a standard clause for all contracts. Married female clergy should never have to operate under the assumption that their compensation is complementary to their partner's primary income. We must insist upon equal pay for equal work. And all search committees for future hires will continue to feature equal female representation.

Fifth, and here I am challenging myself as both a spiritual leader and staff executive, we must recognize that women regularly face harassment on account of their gender and we must believe them when they report it. Each of us bares the responsibility to serve as an advocate and ally when hearing such remarks. After all, our congregation is only as strong as our team members feel empowered and comfortable to operate.

As our nation reflects upon our standards and practices, we are behooved to do so here at Beth El today. Among us sits a generation of young men and women, carefully observing our actions and words to better understand the society into which they are entering. We owe these emerging leaders the opportunity to locate positive examples of empowerment and professionalism within the walls of this synagogue. And just as the priest Eli displayed the humility necessary to admit that his understanding of the role of women was outdated, so too must we be willing to let go of antiquated stereotypes and practices, so that we may live up to the prophetic words of Isaiah, “

כי בֵּיתִי, בֵּית-תְּפִלָּה יִקְרָא לְכָל-הָעַמִּים. For My house will be called a house of prayer for **all** people.

Shana Tova