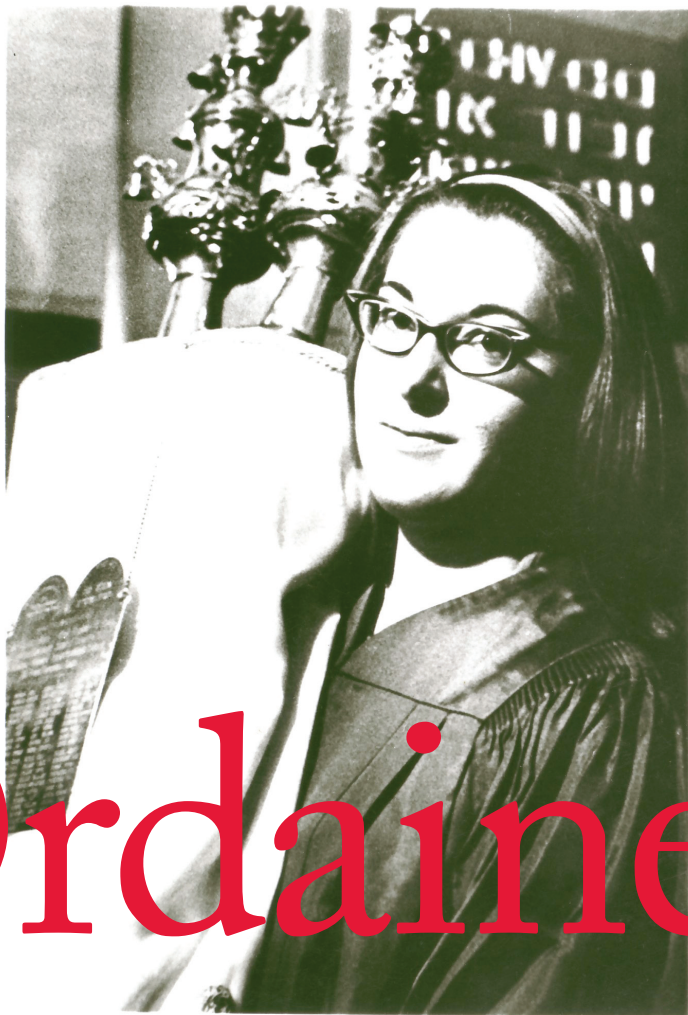


Lilith magazine turns 30 this year. In honor of this milestone, we are listening in on various groups of Jewish women. This time, the early women rabbis. For other cohorts, visit Lilith.org.



Sally Priesand,
1972

Ordained

women rabbis speak their minds

Rabbi Sally Priesand, the first woman ordained in the Reform movement—in 1972—retired last year from her position as rabbi of Monmouth Reform Temple in New Jersey. The Women’s Rabbinic Network, the official support and advocacy organization for women who are Reform rabbis and rabbinic students, decided to use this milestone occasion to ask our *vatikot*—our first-generation veteran Reform women rabbis—to reflect on their experiences. We wanted to honor Sally Priesand, but we had also become profoundly aware of the fact that our younger colleagues did not know the full “herstory” of women in the rabbinate.

The Jewish world has changed quite a lot in the 34 years since Rabbi Priesand was ordained. Women rabbis number in the hundreds. We have gifted women scholars teaching at Conservative and Reconstructionist and Reform seminaries. Ritual and prayer, academic scholarship and text commentary are created by women and now include female experiences. Even with this progress, the Women’s Rabbinic

Network and similar groups still need to work hard to insure salary parity, advocate for equitable family leave policies, support women in part-time and portfolio-specific rabbinates, and guarantee equal opportunity in placement and salary negotiation.

We encouraged our pioneers to share their professional and personal experiences, even if painful. Despite all the difficulties of being “firsts,” our colleagues had only pride when they wrote of their desire to serve as religious leaders in the Jewish community.

We all feel enormous gratitude to Sally for taking the first, brave step toward equal access for women in the rabbinate. Mazal tov, Sally, and thank you.

Rabbi Jackie Koch Ellenson, ordained in 1983, is the Director of the Women’s Rabbinic Network, and Chair of the Hadassah Foundation.

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## When I was ordained, it was difficult to find a job.

Some synagogues refused to interview me, others wanted me for my publicity value and still others wanted to be able to say they were the first to hire a female rabbi. In the end, I got what I have always considered to be the best job: Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York City where Rabbi Ed Klein z”l taught me how to be a rabbi. I left the Free Synagogue after seven years when it became apparent that the congregation would never allow me (or any other woman) to be its senior rabbi. The next two years were spent part-time at Temple Beth El in Elizabeth, New Jersey, where I was warmly welcomed. I also served as a chaplain at Lenox Hill Hospital. I accepted these two positions because I was not able to find a synagogue willing to accept a woman as its only rabbi. In truth, our movement had not yet done the necessary groundwork to raise the consciousness of congregations. I remember a meeting I had with the placement commission: I walked into the room, saw sixteen men sitting around the table and said, “I hope you know that you are part of the problem.”

*Sally Priesand, the first woman ordained in the U.S., recently retired from Monmouth Reform Temple, NJ.*

## I fear that the epitaph on my tombstone will read “She was the one who brought the dildo to Reines’ class.”

Indeed, those were the days. The days when, for my first seminary year, I was the only woman in the rabbinic program at HUC in Cincinnati. The days when Alvin Reines, z”l, was teaching Maimonides’ Guide and using the Pines translation. And we all know the pronunciation of dear old Shlomo Pines’ last name! So every time Dr. R. wanted to refer to that translation, he turned to me and asked if I had “it” with me. Finally, one day I did . . . ergo, “She was the one who brought the dildo to Reines’ class.” Humor got me through. Those were the days, too, when a woman’s bathroom was near impossible to find on the HUC campus . . . the days when our “personal parts” weren’t yet covered on the school’s health insurance . . . the days when it was clear—wherever we went as student rabbis—that those who showed up came to see us fail (at least we drew crowds!) . . . the days of endless speaking engagements on “What It’s Like to be a Woman Student/Rabbi,” (as if I had any other gender frame of reference!) . . . and the days when nothing we wore was ever right!!! Grit and a sure sense of commitment to our sacred work got us through.

*Myra Soifer was ordained in 1978, and is the rabbi at Temple Sinai in Reno, NV.*

## When I arrived, I had no place to stay, for no one at the Jerusalem school would co-sign a paper needed for a pre-rental agreement.

Somehow the feeling permeated the halls that I was a rich, bored housewife who would not be up to completing the first-year program. (I was greeted upon my arrival at the school by the Dean’s unforgettable words: “Oh, you’re that crazy woman I’ve heard about.”) My children and I lived in four unsatisfactory places until August, when a real estate agent finally found an apartment for us. Nevertheless, classes had started and I was studying frantically; yet I felt most fortunate to have this opportunity. The credit for my success I give to my adventuresome children, my husband, home alone, working to support my dream, and the teacher of kitah aleph, who was the only one who believed that I could succeed. I completed my first year (I even won an award—The Most Improved Student!), probably spurred on by my classmates, who told me that if I were to fail, the College-Institute would most likely not admit any other “older students” into the rabbinic program. How far we have come in 30 years from that first “second-career” woman!

*Helene Ferris, ordained in 1981, recently retired as senior rabbi at Temple Israel of Northern Westchester in Croton-on-Hudson, NY.*

## I received the article from my mother, who sent it to me in Jerusalem, where I was studying at Hebrew University during my junior year in college.

As I wrote to Sally Priesand years later, it was that famous (infamous?) article from the New York Times in the Spring of 1972, entitled “Her Ambition Is to Become a Rabbi—and a Housewife.” I didn’t know then what I wanted to do after graduating from college. I was considering some kind of Jewish professional future or, perhaps, law school. And suddenly, although I already knew it was a possibility, there appeared the picture of the real, mini-skirted Sally browsing through a book, determined to succeed as a rabbi. What was important to me was that she existed, that I could do that too, that I could be a rabbi, I really could. Several years ago, I was startled to discover that my then-new rabbinic colleague, Shena Potter, had been born after Sally was already a rabbi. Shena had never known a world without female rabbis. I felt old and thrilled!

*Mindy Avra Portnoy, ordained in 1980, is a rabbi at Temple Sinai in Washington, D.C.*

More than thirty years ago, when people heard that her daughter was a rabbinic student, they would say to my mother, “She’s going to be a *woman rabbi*??”

My mother answered, “I don’t know what other kind she could be.” I recall visiting a patient when I worked as a hospital chaplain, hearing “You’re a rabbi, but you don’t even have a beard.” I responded, “No, and I’m not circumcised, either.” In those days, as now, it helped to have a sense of humor and a great deal of patience to face the reactions of those who were amazed at my bizarre career choice.

*Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus, ordained in 1979, is the rabbi at B’nai Yehuda Beth Shalom in Homewood, IL.*

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We were all very young, most of us fresh out of college.

We were more accidental than intentional revolutionaries. We did not understand then that when you start out as the “first” anything, you always remain the “first.” If you were the first woman to be hired as an assistant in a congregation, you naturally would be the first woman to be made associate there. If you were the first woman to become pregnant in that congregation, you would naturally become the first woman to negotiate maternity leave, to bring your baby to the Temple preschool, and to see your child become bar/bat mitzvah and confirmed. I thought I was done with all these firsts when I packed my kids off to college. Then our colleague Rabbi Patti Karlin Newman called and said, “Your son is the first son of a female rabbi to graduate from Stanford, so you are going to be invited to deliver the Baccalaureate at his graduation.” Never let it be said that there are not great honors in being first. The drive that got us to rabbinical school drove us apart when we got there. It was our singular achievement that had gotten us this far, not our collaborative ability. Along with our male classmates, we studied hard. We were grateful for their support, but their experience was different from ours. We women labored under the added pressure that the individual sins of each of us were to be visited upon the whole. “The women” didn’t talk loudly enough; “the women” didn’t know how to carry the Torah. We worked against each other until finally we realized that competing made a lonely experience even lonelier. In the fledgling Women’s Rabbinic Network, we tested out the possibilities of support and trust which fortunately have evolved into the blessing of friendship.

Ellen Jay Lewis, ordained in 1980, is the rabbi at the Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey in Washington, NJ, and is a psychotherapist in private practice.

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The presence of women in the rabbinate challenged people to think about God in a different way.

The unconscious projections people often made, imagining that God looked something like their older bearded grandfatherly rabbi, couldn’t happen with a woman rabbi. It followed that the masculine metaphors of our liturgy became inadequate and people became more thoughtful about how we speak toward a God who transcends gender. Women rabbis encouraged people to think about life cycle rituals that spoke to the reality of their own lives, from covenant ceremonies for girls, to rituals for miscarriage, to ceremonies for becoming an elder.

For a conference in celebration of the 20th anniversary of women’s ordination, I was invited to deliver a paper on the experience of women rabbis. The career paths of women rabbis looked very different from those of men. Women tended toward education, chaplaincy, part time work, assistantships or small solo congregations. There were no women senior rabbis of large metropolitan congregations. Were women choosing different careers, or were they restricted by a stained glass ceiling? I discovered that few aspired to be like their senior colleagues, working without boundaries, leading top-down institutions. Some of them had negative experiences with their senior colleagues, not only inadequate mentoring but also abuse. I wondered whether large synagogues could be different, and whether I could be a different kind of senior rabbi.

I had a chance to find out. When Temple Emanuel in 1994 took a risk (I’d had no previous congregational experience) and chose me to be its senior rabbi, news reports read: “Stained Glass Ceiling Broken: Major Congregation Selects Woman as Senior Rabbi.”

At Emanuel, after a few years with my gifted assistant rabbi, I asked some leaders of the Reform movement for examples of career paths where an assistant becomes an associate and then a co-rabbi. None existed, and I was advised to steer clear of that vision. But those advisors were wrong. At Emanuel, we have been strengthened by a model of partnership rather than competition, of shared leadership rather than hierarchy, both among synagogue professionals and between clergy and lay leaders. It is a model encouraged by women rabbis who continue to be catalysts for change.

*Laura Geller, ordained in 1976, is a rabbi of Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills, CA.*

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