

Politics of Exclusion in Judaism

Preserving Gender Roles Part 2: Women Rabbis

Agudah welcomes new title for controversial clergywoman

Issue of February 5, 2010/ 21 Shvat 5770

<http://www.thejewishstar.com/stories/Frum-amp-female-but-a-rabbi,1485>

After years of beating around the bush, Rabbi Avi Weiss came right out this past week and said what everyone assumed he's been thinking all along: Sara Hurwitz, the woman he has mentored and trained to function as an Orthodox cleric is, in his view, an Orthodox rabbi.

Rabbi Weiss of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, who founded both Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (for men) and Yeshivat Mahara"t (for women), announced that after a year-long trial run for Hurwitz with the title "Mahara"t" — an acronym for Manhiga Hilchatit Ruchanit Toranit — she will henceforth be known by a more familiar-sounding title: "Rabbah."

"This will make it clear to everyone that Sara Hurwitz is a full member of our rabbinic staff, a rabbi with the additional quality of a distinct woman's voice," Rabbi Weiss explained.

"Over this past year, I have, on numerous occasions, in talks and symposia around the country, said as clearly as I could that Mahara"t means rabbi, and that Sara Hurwitz has received semicha. Having studied the same curriculum as any man would study for ordination, she has achieved this goal."

But outside of his shul in Riverdale, the title of Mahara"t wasn't really working, Rabbi Weiss indicated.

"When Sara Hurwitz has officiated at funerals or visited hospitals or when the title Mahara"t appears in newspapers, it has not resonated. Moreover, at times the term Mahara"t has been used inappropriately in a disrespectful way," he said.

The announcement was met with approval from Rabbi Avi Shafran, a spokesman for Agudath Israel of America, though perhaps not for the reason Rabbi Weiss might have been looking for.

"It is laudable that the disingenuous title has been abandoned, the new one better reflects the intention of its conferrers. Now it would be good for them to come clean, too, about what the entire venture really is: an essential break with the mesorah of Klal Yisrael," Rabbi Shafran said.

Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah Of America Condemn Rabbi Avi Weiss Over Woman Rabbah

February 25, 2010 02:58 PM

<http://www.vosizneias.com/50163/2010/02/25/new-york-moetzes-gedolei-hatorah-of-america-condemn-rabbi-avi-weiss-over-woman-rabbah>

New York - Rabbi Avi Weiss has conferred “semikha” upon a woman, has made her an Assistant Rabbi at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale where she carries out certain traditional rabbinical functions, and has now given her the title of “Rabbah” (formerly “Maharat”). He has stated that the change in title is designed to “make it clear that Sara Hurwitz is a full member of our rabbinic staff, a rabbi with the additional quality of a distinct woman’s voice.”

These developments represent a radical and dangerous departure from Jewish tradition and the mesoras haTorah, and must be condemned in the strongest terms. Any congregation with a woman in a rabbinical position of any sort cannot be considered Orthodox.

Rabbi Simcha Bunim Ehrenfeld

Rabbi Yitzchok Feigelstock

Rabbi Dovid Feinstein

Rabbi Aharon Feldman

Rabbi Yosef Harari-Rafal

Rabbi Shmuel Kamenetsky

Rabbi Aryeh Malkiel Kotler

Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Levin

Rabbi Yaakov Perlow

Rabbi Aaron Schechter

RCA, Rabbi Weiss agree: Todah, no Rabba

Issue of March 5, 2010/ 20 Adar 5770

<http://thejewishstar.com/stories/RCA-Rabbi-Weiss-agree-Todah-no-Rabba,1560>

Update: The following is an updated version of an article in this week's newspaper; it confirms our report from an unnamed source that Rabbi Avi Weiss would back down over his confrontation with the Orthodox establishment over his decision to ordain a woman, Sara Hurwitz, as an Orthodox Rabbi.

Shakespeare’s dictum only applies to roses; a rabbi by any other name is not a rabbi.

Following weeks of negotiation with the Rabbinical Council of America, Rabbi Avi Weiss has made an about face and agreed to not confer the title 'Rabba' on graduates of his Yeshivat Mahara"t for women.

The RCA issued a statement Friday afternoon that confirmed a report in the March 5 issue of The Jewish Star.

The story in the print edition quotes an unnamed source who said, "They're negotiating. The RCA does not want to kick him out and he does not want to be kicked out, but this is an intolerable activity He [Weiss] is an impetuous [sic] fellow, which is okay. Everything is in how he words it. If I had to guess, when Rabbi Weiss retracts, he's going to say this was the right thing at the wrong time and I regret doing it, and I commit to not doing it for a period of time."

Rabbi Basil Herring, executive vice president of the RCA, did not return calls for comment but on Friday afternoon the organization released a statement to announce that Rabbi Weiss had backed down.

Rabbi Weiss said as much in a letter addressed to RCA President Rabbi Moshe Kletenik, which was released to the public:

"It is not my intention or the intention of Yeshivat Maharat to confer the title of "Rabba" upon its graduates," Rabbi Weiss wrote. "Yeshivat Maharat prepares women for positions of religious leadership in the Orthodox community. Each student who completes its course of study in Tanakh, Talmud, Halakha and Jewish Thought, and is deemed fit by her faith, knowledge of our Mesoret, ethical integrity and temperament to assume positions of religious leadership in Orthodox institutions will be confirmed as manhigah hilkhatit, ruhanit, toranit (Maharat)." The RCA statement praised Rabbi Weiss and said the dispute was resolved with "adherence to Torah principles and in a spirit of cooperation for the sake of peace and unity." The statement affirmed the RCA's support for women in positions of leadership, but cautioned that "any innovations that impact the community as a whole should be done only with the broad support of the Orthodox rabbinate and a firm grounding in the eternal mesorah of the Jewish people."

The statement and Rabbi Weiss's letter did not say if Sara Hurwitz would be allowed to retain her title of Rabba or would revert to using the title 'mahara't.' In an interview with The Jewish Star on Monday, Hurwitz said she would continue to use the title, for now.

"Right now I'm still being called 'rabba' and we're undergoing a process within our own community [the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale] to make sure that's the right thing," she said.

Rabbi Avi Weiss's announced ordination several weeks ago of Hurwitz, 33, with the new title of Rabba, drew a furious response from virtually all corners of Orthodox Judaism.

Hurwitz served this past year at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, under the title Mahara't. The upgraded title was necessary, Rabbi Weiss explained, to "make it clear that Sara Hurwitz is a full member of our rabbinic staff."

The notion of a Mahara't was apparently accepted in the Bronx, if barely tolerated elsewhere, but the new title sparked outrage even among some in Riverdale and raised the question: has Rabbi Weiss finally gone too far?

"It was made pretty clear that the alternative was death; even she [Hurwitz] is better off. They were going to expel him and expel the shul. If you look at the Agudah statement they declared him non-Orthodox, not wrong, not mistaken, but not Orthodox," said a source familiar with the negotiation.

Agudath Israel first called the venture of ordaining women to the Orthodox clergy an “essential break with the mesorah (tradition) of klal yisroel” — in the words of a spokesman, Rabbi Avi Shafran — but a Feb. 25 statement signed by the members of Agudah’s Moetzet Gedolei HaTorah (Council of Torah Sages), was even more pointed. “These developments represent a radical and dangerous departure from Jewish tradition and the mesoras haTorah, and must be condemned in the strongest terms. Any congregation with a woman in a rabbinical position of any sort cannot be considered Orthodox,” said the statement, whose signatories included Rabbi Dovid Feinstein, Rabbi Shmuel Kamenetzky and Rabbi Yaakov Perlow, the Novominsker Rebbe.

Their principal objection is based on tznius, modesty, in the understanding of Rabbi Avi Shafran, Agudah’s director of public policy.

“Tznius isn’t a mode of dress. It includes the idea that women are demeaned and not honored when they’re put in the public eye and put on a pedestal. The position he [Weiss] has created violated the concept,” Shafran said. Whether the ordination violates a specific halacha (Torah law), is unimportant, he explained.

“Putting a woman in front of a group of men and women on a regular or ad-hoc basis is violative of tznius. Halacha accomplishes much more than the letter of the law. There is nothing in the Shulchan Aruch about keeping a cat in the aron kodesh. It’s technically permitted but it’s wrong to do.”

Perhaps most importantly, Weiss’s move was made without any authority, Shafran said.

“[If] Weiss had the backing of a world-class posek (halachic decisor) he would have a claim that he’s not departing [from the mesorah], but he does not have any such backings on the recognized Orthodox spectrum, chareidi or central. He’s changing the face of mesorah without anyone of stature behind him.”

While a condemnation from the Agudah was not unexpected, more centrist Orthodox voices were equally unforgiving.

“The ordination of women as rabbis represents a serious and inappropriate breach with our sacred tradition and is beyond the pale of Orthodox Judaism,” said Rabbi Steven Pruzansky, a prominent Orthodox figure and rabbi of Congregation Bnei Yeshuran in Teaneck.

On his blog, Rabbi Pruzansky lambasted Weiss’s move, both from a halachic and historical perspective. The role of female clergy, “not only mimics Reform, but in fact is a throwback to pagan ideologies and a perennial challenge to religious establishments,” he wrote. “Well, all rabbis are created equal, but they do not all carry equal weight,”

Pruzansky explained in a telephone interview. “Tradition strives for consensus, and in almost every case — and the exceptions are literally exceptional cases. The halacha (law), minhag (custom), practice, recommendation, etc. will follow the consensus of rabbis and certainly when the matter at hand has national implications...”

A Jewish Week article last week quoted an unnamed source close to Rabbi Weiss who claimed that the Rabbinical Council of America was planning on expelling Weiss. Already, graduates of Weiss's rabbinical school, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, are prohibited from RCA membership.

Bracha Rutner, who serves in the Riverdale Jewish Center as a Yoetzet Halacha, a role akin to Hurwitz's in some ways, wasn't sure about the impact of a formal ordination. As a Yoetzet, Rutner is a halachic advisor to women in the community regarding taharat mishpacha (laws of family purity) and a variety of other issues, but she does not occupy a public rabbinical position.

"It's an important step in the advancement of women. I just don't know if this is the appropriate time to do it," explained Rutner. "Maybe in the future, with women having more experience it is something that would have come out, but I just don't think at this time it was the best thing for the community at large."

Rutner said that she and other Yoatzot Halacha have worked subtly to make changes in the Jewish community. "We're proponents of doing things quietly," she explained and said the results of that approach have been positive.

"What has happened is people have come out and talked about what we're doing: showing the number of phone calls, and the number of children able to come in the world. We keep things quiet, as opposed to presenting it so publicly."

Rabbi Weiss has his defenders. Most prominent among them is Rabbi Marc Angel, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Shearith Israel, the historic Spanish and Portugese Synagogue in New York City. "Rabbi Weiss is a visionary; an Orthodox rabbi who has the courage to grapple with many issues that other rabbis fear to confront," he explained via email, before the report of Rabbi Weiss' retraction was made public. "Whether or not people agree with him, they should respect the seriousness of his endeavor and his absolute commitment to make Orthodoxy grow and thrive in a meaningful, vibrant and 'open' manner."

All change, he said, come with an accompanying friction.

"Whenever someone suggests a change in old patterns — even when the change is organic and halakhically proper — there will be those who reflexively oppose the innovator, and who prefer to keep Orthodoxy closed, hierarchical and authoritarian."

Agudah: RCA and Avi Weiss Agreement On "Rabba" is a "Superficial Move"

Tuesday March 9, 2010 3:08 PM

<http://matzav.com/agudah-rca-and-avi-weiss-agreement-on-rabba-is-a-superficial-move>

Upon consultation with its rabbinic leadership, Agudath Israel of America issued the following statement today:

The leadership of the Rabbinical Council of America and Rabbi Avi Weiss have apparently reached agreement that Rabbi Weiss would no longer confer the title of “Rabba” upon graduates of his women’s seminary, but rather the title “Maharat.”

This superficial move does not in any way change the position of the Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah that placing women in traditional rabbinic positions departs from the Jewish mesorah, and that any congregation with a woman in such a position cannot call itself Orthodox.

That the leadership of a respected rabbinical organization seems to have capitulated to Rabbi Weiss’ enterprise is deeply dismaying. We trust that this capitulation does not represent the perspective of the principled majority of the organization’s member rabbis.

Backlash to visit by Sara Hurwitz

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<http://thejewishstar.com/stories/Backlash-to-visitbySaraHurwitz,1834>

Scholars-in-residence come and go in the Five Towns — a nearly weekly visitation to one shul or another that usually passes without comment. But one invitation several weeks ago sparked an unusual, if short-lived, effort to rally the local rabbinate in condemnation, and a rabbi’s blistering essay in a local publication.

The public announcement was low-key: “Young Israel of Hewlett will host Ms. Sara Hurwitz,” read the notice from the shul that appeared in community newspapers, including this one. But it referred to Rabba Sara Hurwitz, whose controversial title is to remain unique to her under the terms of an agreement between the Rabbinical Council of America and her mentor, Rabbi Avi Weiss. In May, Rabbi Weiss backed away from his plan to ordain Orthodox women. He did so under threat of expulsion from the RCA, condemnation from virtually the entire Orthodox world, including Agudath Israel of America’s Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah, and, reportedly, internal pressure from male students within his own yeshiva.

An attendee at Hurwitz’s three lectures over the weekend of Parshat Korach said that Rabbi Heshy Blumstein introduced her with praise for her knowledge but pointedly omitted the title Rabba, citing the widespread objections sparked by its conferral. Citing a death in his shul, Rabbi Blumstein declined to speak to The Jewish Star.

A June 23 e-mail obtained by The Jewish Star, signed by Rabbi Zvi Flaum, chairman of the Vaad Harabanim of the Five Towns and Far Rockaway, urged local rabbis to attend a meeting that night “at Cong. Shaaray Tefila with the president of the Young Israel of Hewlett (Rabbi Blumstein’s shul). We will be discussing recent events that happened in that shul and I urge your participation so that he should see the broad based united voice in regard to the recent bizayon HaTorah,” literally ‘humiliation of the Torah.’

The meeting never took place and Rabbi Flaum, formerly of the White Shul, declined to comment.

But the most prominent criticism came in a newspaper article by Rabbi Aryeh Zev Ginzberg of the Chofetz Chaim Torah Center in Cedarhurst. Writing in the Five Towns Jewish Times, he claimed to “have been asked by one of the senior gedolei ha’dor (great Torah leaders of the generation), as well as by several of my distinguished colleagues to bring to the attention of the general community the great bizayon HaTorah, the degradation of the Gedolei Torah (Torah greats), that took place in our community this past Shabbos.” He did not name the other rabbonim although he promised that they would be identified upon request. A request by the Jewish Star for the names was unsuccessful.

Hurwitz “may be proficient in the entire Shach and Taz (which I have no way of knowing, yet I am highly doubtful),” Ginzberg wrote, referring to the works of two primary halachic commentators on the Shulchan Aruch. Her and Rabbi Weiss’s actions, “sent a loud and clear message to all who heard them: the unified words of our Gedolei Torah and distinguished rabbonim mean absolutely nothing,” he said.

“The concept of Da’as Torah, emunas Chachamim (trust in scholars), and kavod (honor) for talmidei chachamim are all ancient ideas that are to be tossed to the side, along with our ancient mesorah (tradition), all for the sake of feminism and perceived equality,” the article continued.

Because of the event, “this coming Tisha B’Av, we will have something else to cry about,” Rabbi Ginzberg concluded.

Rabbi Ginzberg did not respond to requests for comment.

A commenter on that newspaper’s website claimed to be a member of Rabbi Ginzberg’s shul and said that he and other members were unhappy about the article:

“[We] do not understand why you are making a Machlokis (sic) with another shul that is having an event in their own shul,” the post read. “We should be dealing with the problems that exist in our own shul. The disagreements between members, the talking that goes on in the back, and the real problems that some of our members are having with parnassah or marital problems. Instead of dealing with these important issues, you are starting a fight with another shul for no reason. Focus on the problems at home before you fix other people’s problems.” Rabbi Herschel Billet of the Young Israel of Woodmere “strongly objected to the ad hominem, embarrassing and dismissing comments about Sara Hurwitz’s knowledge,” he said in condemning the article.

“The author asserts that the programming of Young Israel of Hewlett is something else to mourn about on Tisha B’Av,” Rabbi Billet said.

“I would think that Jews beating other Jews in Israel and the world making a blood libel about Israel is something serious to mourn about on Tisha B’Av — not the programming of the Young Israel of Hewlett.”

The Young Israel of Hewlett “is an Orthodox synagogue with an Orthodox rabbi,” Rabbi Billet added. “He is the mora d’asra and he has the right to determine halachic decisions about programming, and he should not be subject to my or other rabbis’ scrutiny for the decisions he makes for the shul.”

Rabbi Kenneth Hain of Congregation Beth Sholom in Lawrence explained that he felt it is “important to allow some diversity of opinion inside Orthodoxy, whether we agree or not with that opinion.”

“Diversity in Orthodoxy has a strong tradition and there have been long-held differences in opinion about issues in terms of women’s role and relations between Orthodoxy and other movements vis-à-vis Religious Zionism and the role of religion in the Jewish State,” Rabbi Hain explained. “Now as we enter into an era [when] women’s Torah education has increased exponentially on the highest level, the Jewish community is confronting how to respond.”

“I’m sure in this case that the rabbi deliberated and even consulted with his authority and his teachers and arrived at a decision and I have to respect that,” Rabbi Hain said. “I think a part of the legitimacy of a rabbinic position is to make decisions for his congregation together with his leadership. I think that’s fundamental.”

Hurwitz, who appeared this week at number 36 on Newsweek’s unscientific yearly ranking of the top 50 rabbis in America, was sanguine about the Ginzberg article. “It’s not new to me. I don’t have much to say, I feel like people have to work it out for themselves,” Hurwitz told The Jewish Star by phone. “I’m committed to serving Klal Yisroel and the Jewish people and teaching Torah and that’s what I’m going to continue doing, with G-d’s help.”

Hurwitz has had speaking engagements cancelled in other communities, she said, and expressed gratitude for the opportunity to speak in the Five Towns.

“I’m thrilled that the Young Israel of Hewlett invited me,” she said, “and really honored to have been welcomed to the community.”