



Reform Israeli Female Rabbis Perform Community Leadership

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Abstract

This article analyzes leadership performances of Israeli women serving as reform rabbis. The writer examines the ways in which these women construct the pattern of their religious leadership, the meanings they embed into the different practices they lead in their communities, and their unique conceptualizations of the role of female community rabbis. Reform female rabbi, who are also referred to as “rabba,” are excluded and discriminated against in Israel as leaders of communities overtly delegitimized by the government. Their unstable social status allows them great freedom to act and interpret the operational definition of Israeli community rabbinate. The female Rabbis’ stories are a product of a broader process of social change in women’s status in modern society in general and in Israeli society in particular.

Keywords: rabbinate, Reform Judaism, performance, gender, Israeli society

Introduction: Female Rabbinate: Performance of Jewish Feminist Phenomenon

The increasing presence of hundreds of women ordained for community rabbinate constitutes one of the most significant reforms in contemporary Judaism. The pioneer in this was the American Reform Movement, first to ordain a woman rabbi, motivated by its religious outlook of abolishing all distinctions between men and women (Laznow). The women became the “mediators” of the new dynamic involvement in the religious practices performed, and their renewed public participation provoked a shift in the Jewish world’s gender structure. Their service has had continuing influence on Jewish theology, prayers,

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rituals, and the way in which other streams of Judaism construct the Jewish woman's religious status (Barack-Fishman).

Almost 20 years lapsed between the first American ordination of a woman rabbi in 1972 and the first ordination of a women rabbi in Israel. Since the first ordination, dozens of reform female rabbis are ordained every year by the Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. On occasion, the number of female graduates exceeds the number of male graduates. Some of these women proceed to serve as community rabbis, while others turn to other leadership professions.

Research conducted across several countries shows that reform female rabbis still earn less than their male colleagues. The explanations for this gender inequality are inconclusive. It may be explained by the remnants of a gradually deteriorating conservatism, which motivates congregants to choose a male rather than female rabbi, yet the fact that fewer women are interested in being ordained is also an important consideration. A sense of frustration is apparent among many female rabbis, who feel they are being marginalized. Their concern regards the disparity between the significant contribution of women to the Progressive Jewish world (another term for Reform Judaism), and the male leadership's tendency to overlook the issue of gender inequality.

This paper suggests that Israeli female rabbis are significant social agents in the fields of both religion and gender. As social agents, they empower a multi-voiced discussion about, and from within, marginalized social categories, which now take part in Jewish community life and reconstruct its leadership.

The writer of this paper explores three different models of reform community rabbinical leadership through the work of three Israeli female rabbis. Each of these rabbis offers her unique perspective and interpretation of her role as rabbi as well as of the ritual and the text. Each unravels her personal story of an intimate encounter with the Jewish world and Israeli society. The rabbis' leadership performance, as exemplified by each model, is in accordance with the new forms of religiousness, which are much more complex and flexible than they used to be.

The term "performance" is a key element in queer theory and LGBTQ research, which expresses new ways of thinking about the connection between subjugation as a product of discourse and social structures. Butler argues that since the conceptual perception of identity is always operational, performative identity has no ontological origin, but rather is the incarnation of a lost identity. Operational identity is conceived through fluid, context-dependent, and alternating terminology, while the term "identity" is perceived as binary, stable, and predetermined. Identities are constructed out of the social order's behavioral conventions, which create and reaffirm norms and roles from which subjective identities grow. The emphasis on the operational aspect diverts attention to an analysis of how individuals and groups can gain social and political power. Furthermore, Butler emphasizes the existence of a power relationship in any form of interaction.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews as well as participant observations during Shabbat services, Jewish holidays, life cycle rituals, and routine life at the community beit midrash (Jewish study hall) between 2014 and 2016. The semi-structured

interviews were conducted during the early stages of research to obtain each rabbi's personal story and to reveal the tension between reality and that which is professed. Each participant observation in religious and cultural practices exposed new elements of the rabbis' leadership performance. By allowing the researcher into their communities and into their hearts, the rabbis contributed to a better theoretical understanding of their female perspective on the reform communities' rabbinates.

Feminist ethnography is a productive methodology to collect knowledge about women's lives in specific cultural contexts, recognizing the potential detriments and benefits of representation, exploring women's experiences of oppression along with the agency they exercise in their own lives, and feeling an ethical responsibility towards the communities in which the researchers work. This set of imperatives enables feminist ethnographers to successfully navigate the challenges they face (Schrock).

Theoretical Paradigm: The Three Spheres

In *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter Berger claims that religion in modernity is characterized by pluralism, privatization, and recognition that religion is a social construction. Churches, synagogues, and other religious organizations continue to play an important role in contemporary society (Berladena) and for their leader. Female rabbis' leadership of reform Israeli communities is constituted on a dynamic negotiation that takes place on three spheres: the organizational sphere, the conceptual sphere, and the ethno-national sphere.

The organizational sphere refers to the female rabbis' community, which serves as a ground for female leadership. The community becomes a sphere through which the leaders and members express their gender, religion, and other identities. The community also allows the group to gain recognition and nurtures a sense of identity and belonging (Taylor). The community has always been a rich resource for the formation of a sense of belonging of Jewish individuals. Rabbi Soloveitchik describes the Jewish community as an entity of its own and believes that "individuals who belong to a community complete each other . . . as individuals from the community; the community forms the individual's identity." Today religious communities offer different explanations for association and sense of belonging. According to Ammerman and Farnsley, urban congregations usually lie somewhere between the two poles of parish and niche, but identifying the poles is critical to understanding how congregations are responding to change in their communities. She adds that we need to know more about congregations than just their age, size, and demographics.

One way to take a measure of religious traditions is to look at particular denominations and faiths. Another way is to look at the religious landscape is to see how congregations think about what they ought to be doing in the world. When people are in immediate need, congregations want to be part of the solution (Wuthnow). People want to salve some of society's wounds, and most of them recognize that they cannot respond to all the needs around them. Leaders say they work hard at providing this family-like atmosphere, and members say they are looking for a warm, friendly community when they choose a congregation.

The conceptual sphere refers to the community's ideological infrastructure – in this case, the Jewish Reform Movement's outlook, which encourages pluralistic communities

constituted on liberal values, such as gender equality (Prell). Since the founding of the Reform Movement, gender equality has been considered a core principle of Judaism and, consequently, the movement aspires to discontinue the separation between genders both in worship and in the rabbinical leadership itself (Tabory and Lazerwitz). Gender equality is a basic value in Reform theology and liturgy. Dan Cohn-Sherbok describes Reform as a modification “of traditional belief and practice to meet contemporary needs.” Men and women sit together during shortened services, read from the Torah, and women can be ordained as rabbis. Above all, Cohn-Sherbok writes, Reform Judaism is a movement that “advocates the harmonization of the Jewish tradition with modern life and culture” (452).

Both the organizational-communal and the conceptual-reform spheres exist within a geographical space. This geographical space is the ethno-national sphere, which simultaneously destabilizes and supports reform community rabbinates led by women. On the one hand, the establishment of the national state diminished the traditional role of communities in the social-Jewish system. Prior to the establishment of the state of Israel, religious practice and Jewish life in the Diaspora were organized by the communities. The process of diminishing the Jewish community peaked with the return to Zion, which introduced a new awareness: the “normality” of the “new Jew” are terms coined in the context of secular Zionist ethos (Boyarin). The new Jews were no longer in need of a community (Conforti: 70) for they now had a state (Ben-Yosef: 110) to govern the required service systems. However, it seems the state socialization mechanism was unable to create a significant sense of belonging and Jewish identity for most of the population. The establishment of a state alone is insufficient for fulfilling one’s need for identity, meaning, and belonging, and is a poor substitute for the psychological needs that communities fulfill. This shortcoming is reflected in the increasing need for a model that will construct Jewish communities in the social sphere, which has become a challenge for the Jewish liberal movements pursuing recognition of non-orthodox expressions. The new Israeli Jewish community is situated on the border between the personal and public spheres, between a sense of a private home and that of a national home.

Moreover, the Jewish national state supervises not only civic matters, but purely religious ones as well. Granting legal authority to the foundations of Jewish law in the ethno-national setting forces onto the public an impoverished religious interpretation of Jewish identity. In addition, the Religious Party’s growing political prominence has overwhelmed the Israeli public and made it aware of the power of Orthodox Judaism, both legally and consciously. In this way, the state left Judaism solely to the orthodox. The focus on the aggressive conflict between the secular population and religious communities conceals their cooperation in the oppression of other groups and the prevention of emergent identities. Revealing the power relations between the secular and religious-orthodox sectors means mapping the entire interest system, both overt and covert, operating in Israeli society. The dichotomy between religious and secular sectors is a product of imagination, which distracts attention from the internal power struggles occurring within each group and from the discrimination of small groups. The marginalized groups are perceived as minor and unworthy of partaking in the public discourse.

Israeli secular and religious identities establish themselves through a mediating category: national, Halacha, normative, conventional, historical, gender, ethnic, and status (Goodman

and Yona). Each of these categories exclude communities whose attributes are not consistent with their own and generate a discourse that reaffirms and perpetuates national or ethno-racial hierarchies (Shanhav: 171). Thus, the very existence of a Jewish sovereignty becomes a challenge for liberal Jewish communities seeking to enable the expression of marginalized identities by restoring the Jewish community model.

Consequently, the Israeli government renders some of its functional and mental contributions superfluous and questions the existence and necessity of the community mechanism. The Israeli government also ideologically contests the recognition of non-orthodox Jewish communities and their leaders' eligibility for financial support and official religious authority. The orthodox streams, in comparison, receive legal recognition, financial, and governmental support. The reform communities are not financed by the Ministry of Religious Services and their rabbis are not authorized to represent their communities at religious councils or to perform official conversions and weddings. On the surface, government recognition would officially legitimize the Reform Movement as a social and cultural institution and provide it with the financial and governmental resources it needs to sustain and develop, though this would not be the product of legal reforms alone. A shift in the Israeli everyday environment would be required to overcome the existing sexist, macho, and skeptical sentiment towards female rabbis.

According to Marx, the exclusion of women from financial benefits and of communities from public goods is based on sectoral discrimination. The non-orthodox community's liberal views, and not gender issues, are the source of the problems it faces. Sectoral discrimination is not gender specific; reform rabbis are rejected and excluded from both the public discourse and the religious institution regardless of their sex. This fact creates a sense of shared destiny among reform rabbis and reduces the inequality in salaries.

Female rabbis' subjugation to sectoral and gender discrimination places them in a position that often results in very particular religious practices. The different types of practices led by female rabbis reflect creations, diversity of interpretations, and transformations in the definition and significance of Jewish ritual and text. Female rabbis' leadership should be understood through their overt references to their gendered identities and to their feminine bodies as full partners in the performance, their open acknowledgment of their social status as mothers, and/or their sexual orientations. This is a factual base of the prevailing Jewish ritual structure, the meanings of which are altered.

The synergy between the three spheres (the organizational, the conceptual, and the ethno-national) is a holistic infrastructure, based on which female rabbis' community leadership patterns can be analyzed, deciphered, and understood, as well as compared with one another. Though each rabbi's leadership performance is based on a personal value system and a way of life that she strives to offer through her community rabbinate, their leadership is influenced by the dynamic power relations operating to change the gender, religious, or national order, and, to an extent, by the power relations operating within the Israeli Reform Movement itself.

The following is a description of three different models of community leadership performance. Each model reveals the professional aspects constructing the role as well as the rabbis' values and interpretations of contemporary Israeli reform female leadership.

First Model: Neo-Hassidic-Spiritual Leadership Performance

Rabba Mira Raz leads the Daniel community of Jaffa, Israel. Born in Tel Aviv and carrying the title of reform rabbi for over 20 years, Rabba Raz has developed a neo-Hassidic spiritual approach based on the wisdom of the Kabbala. She establishes her leadership with profound knowledge of the worlds of the Midrash and the Kabbala:

To me, being a reform Rabbi means profoundly connecting the essence of the Torah, which originates from the heavens, to a consciousness inclined to create a reality of mending this world. Above all I see myself as a teacher. There is meaning beyond the practice; we must live our lives aware of the fact that faith comes before practice.

She teaches a community beit midrash during the week and holds the Shabbat services. The beit midrash serves as a stage for Raz to explain and justify the secrets of creation and human behavior through the holy text. She is determined and devoted to filling her congregants' hearts with pure faith. The following dialogue between Raz and the members of her congregants at the community beit midrash exemplifies her vocation (November 2016):

Rabba Raz: "The people of Israel were purposely created as a people of slaves. We became a 'people' in the book of Exodus, thanks to Pharaoh. There is a prophecy here; the people destined to be allies of the divine deity, shall begin their life as a people of slaves. This is intentional! (She emphasizes her words by pointing her finger and forcefully landing it on the cover of the Bible.) . . . You must understand, the laws of creation are the laws of creation, even when it seems to us that God is not keeping the laws of creation, we must return to the text 'A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.' He who believes will not search for wrongdoings in the acts of God. Even when I am angry at God and there are tragedies in the world, pure faith is the challenge the Torah sets for humanity."

A community member comments: "Mira, that's called being gullible."

Rabba Raz replies: "The word 'gullible' is a great enemy of pure faith. Whoever believes in this word should toss it into the toilet and flush."

Another community member adds: "The problem is that people make you feel gullible."

Rabba Raz: "What is more important to you: your connection to God or what people say to you? One who is in a process of awareness, stands before the divinity, not before people. . . Tell me do you stand before a benevolent God or people? He who chooses what others say about him, will suffer more than he who chooses God – in his soul."

In addition to teaching at the beit midrash, Rabba Raz gives sermons during Shabbat services, in which she describes the Torah as a source of life and elevation of the spirit using Kabbalistic expressions to attribute meaning to faith and religious practice. The following is taken from the rabba's speech on Shemini Atzeret, Simchat Torah, 2014:

Why must we rejoice in this Torah so much? When a person is thirsty and is brought water, and he drinks it, he feels as though he were brought back to life. When you study the Torah, that is the water and it revives us. Simply revives us! That is our joy and we are very happy it was brought down to us from higher worlds . . .

Other than the evident use of Simchat Torah as another opportunity for the rabba to convey her recurring message of studying the Torah, this specific holiday carries much importance for the gender discourse. The women dance and circuit the synagogue with the Torah – an act of worship practiced only by men in Orthodox Judaism (Vigoda: 200). This Simchat Torah ritual is one of the most prominent means in the struggle to break down gender barriers. The following words are from Rabba Raz’s sermon two years later at the Simchat Torah circuits of 2016:

This is not dancing for the sake of dancing. Remember that we have gathered to rejoice with the Torah. Why must we dance with this Torah? Because it is the source of our joy. Treat the Torah as something human, close, and intimate. We shall embrace, woman and man, we shall be with the Torah and dance and rejoice with it.

Rabba Raz’s arguably erotic description reveals the spiritual and religious functions of dancing with the Torah at the traditional circuit ritual, which takes place once a year at the entrance to the community’s home in the heart of Jaffa. The dance is not merely a technical and functional act, but rather conveys social and cultural messages within the ritualistic structure. The dance has the power not only to reflect the existing reality, but also to reconstruct society’s power relationships and creatively translate its prevailing ideas by using the physical body. Practiced by reform communities, which seek to abolish gender separation in worship and include women in the religious practice, this dance takes on a political-feminist dimension. The choreography is that of a continuing protest against years of exclusion and distancing women from rituals and the holy text. Furthermore, the decision to hold the event in public, outside of the synagogue, in the heart of Jaffa, recognizes the strategic use of the public domain as a political platform for deconstruction and reconstruction. The same can be said about the body, which moves and dances.

Rabba Raz locates the path to understanding the power relationships between sexes in the Torah. She claims that feminism reveals an element that has always appeared in the Torah. During the interview, she requested that the reference to her religiousness be separated from the gender context, to allow prominence to the big questions regarding the symbolic expressions of accepting the burden of Torah:

“Male and female created he them; and blessed them, and called their name Adam, in the day when they were created.” . . . Ignore the body, we are talking about an energy which lingers and is both masculine and feminine. It is a balance of the “tree of life” model. A balance achieved through consciousness. We must ignore the body, for it is the *Pesbat* (explanation of the Torah). Therefore, maybe I’m a post-feminist.

Breaking down the gender barriers contributes to breaking down the barriers protecting the dichotomist religious perception of faith and spirituality, and constitutes the female rabbi's status and authority:

Two Orthodox men came to my lesson and at the end, they said to me: "You are a Hassidic leader, not just a rabbi." They meant that I'm Hassidic, the spiritual matters and all . . . those are the secrets of the Torah: the core of the Torah. Look, it's a spiritual outlook, but since the spirit is God, it is a matter of faith. And of course, being a matter of faith, it is also a religious outlook. Be there is no faith void of religion. Faith is the basis for it all.

Rabba Raz views faith as the basis for both the spiritual and religious outlook, and thus rejects the hierarchal relationships between them. By breaking down the binary between religion and spirituality, she dissolves the hierarchy between the two. She also finds it hard to accept the popular distinction between universal and Jewish values, as well as new Jewish social categories, such as "non-religious believer," which Rabba Raz considers no less than a tragedy. She defines herself as "a religious, reform Haredi" (Ultra-Orthodox Jew), although it seems social categories position her in a conflictual state, considering her own category is delegitimized by Israeli society and institutions. People know that Mira does not cut any slack for those who use the word "religious":

I correct them immediately; instead, say you met an Orthodox. I am also very religious. I believe in the prophets' moral code. Faith is the basis of it all. I ask: "Is thou shall not steal a religious value?" and they respond automatically: "No! It's universal." People don't understand that they are doing the Torah a great injustice, stripping the Torah of its moral code. Or another expression, "I am a believer, but not religious." This expression is both absurd and tragic. It's absurd because one cannot separate faith from religion, and it's a tragedy when one separates religion from a moral code.

Rabba Raz uses the Torah as a political tool to implement coexistence and neighborly relations between the Jewish population of Israel and its other inhabitants. The reality of her community, situated in an intensely charged multi-faith area, often requires her to provide religious justification to settle disputes. During a community *Mimuna* (traditional North-African Jewish feast associated with Passover) event, held in May 2015, the rabbi, dressed in a traditional Moroccan Kaftan, attempted to explain the social and political relations between the Arab and Jewish populations of Jaffa by means of a Kabbalistic insight:

We all believe in one God, so we are the same. One experience created us all. We are all of one source. The world is a unity of opposites. Though physically we are all one, a consciousness – which understands all creation – is one unit, its beauty lies in how different we are from one another and how we learn to transcend those differences. The more we cooperate with each other, here in Jaffa and in general, the more we will bring about a significant change in consciousness.

Her political call for unity and peace among neighbors, delivered through a Kabbalistic explanation, is contextualized in the spirit of the neo-Hassidic movement's attempts to

provide an alternative for the current intensification of dogmatic and fundamentalist religion (Huss).

Rabba Raz echoes a contemporary spiritual perception (New Age), which includes neo-Hassidic elements. These elements are not necessarily subjected to or dependent on the rite or practice of a certain ritual; the New Age spirituality sanctifies moral relativism, avoiding moral judgments of any sort, and thus is seemingly a post-modern philosophy in which there are no universal truths and all ideas are equally valid. In this way, the challenge of Jewish and Arab coexistence is explicated as part of a sovereignty drowning in conflicting historiographic narratives. Rabba Raz uses the secrets of the Kabbala to re-conceptualize faith and spirit, embedding vital, new, relevant meaning in every aspect of life and of the existing, reigning religious canon.

The religious leader's authoritative status is based mainly on knowledge of the Torah (Talmud proficiency and capacity in Halacha ruling); knowledge becomes the primary qualification for one's leadership and thus a source of strength. Rabba Raz has a covert awareness of the fact that profound knowledge of the Torah is an effective source for her overt leadership and social status; this awareness is based on the idea that accessibility of the Torah and the Halacha lifts one of the main obstacles in women's path to leadership.

Torah studies produce literate women and teaches them critical thinking. These women have learned to scrutinize the material and question its relevance as well as reread the text and contribute their own understandings to the male corpus (Keren). The Jewish-female identity crisis grants a new interpretive tool and a fresh perspective on Torah studies (Ticochinsky).

Rabba Raz is a truly charismatic leader. She attributes every human being with the power of divine enlightenment, unlike the *Hasidus*, which only ascribes this to the most pious. She offers an inclusive outlook, which acknowledges the soul as a fragment of the divine; the soul, unlike the spirit, is bound to the body and perishes with it. In this way, Rabba Raz constructs a spiritual-intellectual leadership as well as a socio-cultural one.

Second Model: Lesbian-Queer-Political Leadership Performance

While Rabba Raz's theology is based on letting the Torah out of the Holy Ark, there is an additional voice coaxing the Torah out of an entirely different closet. This voice is harmonized with the former, and emphasizes that Reform Judaism and its communities subscribe to postmodern philosophies by focusing on the individual and its needs. This is well represented by Rabba Efrat Rotem, leader of the Lev community, located in the center of Tel Aviv. Born in Israel only 30 some years ago, Rabba Rotem is the youngest of the three rabbas described in this paper, only beginning her career in community rabbinate:

I'm still figuring out what it means to be a Reform rabba and struggling with the question: "How do I, as a community rabba, lead these people?!" I can say that I create a spiritual environment for which I take responsibility. My leadership is Jewish-political and fully dedicated to Tikkun Olam (mending of the world) and the image of God. To me this means discovering and sounding my voice, out of a desire to spiritually influence others and subsequently the world. I don't object to the term, "religious leadership" but

to me it's a Jewish-spiritual leadership. Spirituality in search of a Jewish language, maybe that's why it's religious. But to me it's a spiritual language; Judaism today is an apparatus for spirituality.

The rabba is in no rush to declare her rabbinate a religious leadership in the traditional sense. Spirituality is not just an emaciated term to the Rabbi, but rather a form of leadership, which differs from the Reform Movement's perception of the "religious" role and perhaps completes it. This distinction becomes possible by the rabba's holistic perception of her own varied identities, which construct her leadership performance. Rabba Rotem is (by her own unabbreviated definition) a lesbian, queer, butch, feminist, reform-traditionalist, pursuing the acceptance of LGBTQ persons into the Jewish discourse. Rabba Rotem's identity definition is analogous to the shifts in Israeli identity, in which monolithic identities are currently being decomposed into different "selves," which converse with one another (Abuhab). The individual "I" is different than in the past and is established nowadays on a system that is saturated with connections to interlocutors from different societies and cultures. These create a located "I" in the social aspect that carries a multiplicity of identities (Gergen). According to Watson (2005), to be queer means to be investigating one's own formation. Rabba Rotem's connection to Reform Judaism is partly anchored by the ties among the excluded communities to which she belongs. Her sexual and gender identity are that which make her religious path a political one:

I consider myself reform partly because in Israel reform is an identity that is oppressed and discriminated against; I identify with that and choose to be part of it. I searched for a minority in what I saw as constitutionalized, Israeli, Jewish Orthodoxy. I came from a minority mindset and I still think as a minority. I am at absolute peace with my queer-lesbian identity and my butch identity. They allow me to view the world differently. To be myself as a rabba is also a challenge because I know I'm different. People look at me and they don't know if I'm a man or a woman, and I don't care. If people like what I offer them, they accept it from a lesbian, they accept it from a butch. I'm highly occupied with not leaving parts of myself behind. I don't worry about not being easy to process because I don't do anything to be hard to process. Besides, it's important people know there are all kinds of examples of lesbian rabbis, not just one. I don't lead as a lesbian, I lead as Efrat.

Rabba Rotem's identification with Reform Judaism reflects queer theory's strategy of uniting the many struggles of excluded and oppressed communities. Intersecting identities of different yet similar backgrounds marginalize social statuses and have the potential to create a new hybrid identity, or at least a shared practice. Intersectionality theory emphasizes that the aim is not to form one collective identity but rather a pluralistic set of values and symbols consisting of the ways in which individuals imagine the collective's cultural, historical, and religious distinction, as well as the way in which they describe their affiliation to the collective and their practical obligation to it. In recognizing the limitations of theorizing gender as a unified collective transcending race and class, intersectionality calls on scholars to be more inclusive of a broader group of women in their analysis of gender and definitions of what is feminist (Samuels and Ross-Sheriff: 5).

It is understandable that Rabba Rotem found a home in Reform Judaism, which views LGBTQ persons as an integral part of its community's human fabric. In this way, the Lev community, led by a queer-lesbian-butch rabbi, became a safe Jewish space and a place where different gender and sexual identities meet for respectful Shabbat services and unique prayers (such as a Shabbat service held in honor of the International Transgender Day of Remembrance). Rabba Rotem must coherently preserve the Reform Movement's particularity while renewing and adapting with sensitivity the text and the ritual to the gender discourse and the individuals who represent it. Butler explains that the praxis itself is not a kind of preexisting identity; the praxis constitutes identity and constructs gender because culture imprints its mark on the human body. The identity is a set of lingual and physical symbols which construct and constitute what it claims to describe. The queer performance should be characterized as a revision, a deconstruction and reconstruction of unities that create, divert, and redirect power in concrete contexts. The following segment from the rabba's sermon on a special Shabbat service in honor of the International Transgender Day of Remembrance at the Lev community in November 2014 reflects the community's demand to be the solution to the queer issue:

. . . the work of continually connecting Judaism with varied gender and sexual identities is imperative. The community can pay close attention to these gender groundbreakers' life experiences, which manifest the courage to expand the limits we have been convinced of, and the courage to walk these paths as a persecuted minority, just as the Jews had walked in recent history.

Wrapped in a black striped tallit, Rabba Rotem sorrowfully urges her congregants to tap into their pain and learn from the life experiences of LGBTQ persons, who crammed their identities in suffocating closets out of an obligation to traditional Judaism. This is a double mission in her eyes: LGBTQ persons must lead the way for the enrichment of choices and the acceptance of different identities, while the Reform Movement's communities must yield to the LGBTQ community both in spirit and in action. It is evident from her sermon that Rabba Rotem is attacking the sexual symbol code, which means, per the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, "believing in the diversity of sexually marked voices" (Derrida and McDonald: 76). The feminist theoretician, Sandra Harding, claims androcentric scientific beliefs are mainly based on a depiction of the word in antithetic terms, which are perceived as gender polarities. It is not about men or women, but rather about a set of cultural symbols that construct the consciousness and influence the way members of society act under the impression that gender polarities, divided into pairs of opposites, are a central organizational principle. This is conveyed by language, especially the Hebrew language, as a cultural-political recourse and as a tool to allow gender to influence society. At the end of our interview, I asked Rabba Rotem: "By the way, why rabba and not rabbi?" She responded: "I like being a rabba and looking masculine like I do." Of course, this is not a technical or terminological question alone, but rather carries cultural meaning and value. Marx explains that those who side with the title of "rabbi" do so because it is the accepted term, which does not require any further explanation, and thus using it emphasizes gender equality. The supporters of the term "rabbi" also claim that the term "rabba" may be misconstrued as a title referring to a different, new, and perhaps diminished profession. On the other hand, those who side with the title of "rabba" emphasize the importance of normalizing it;

considering that in Hebrew, all titles and professions have both a male and female form, so should the rabbinic title. The female form of the title stresses their gender and authority. Rabba Rotem's linguistic choice to carry the title of "rabba" while physically appearing like a man is part of her performance, which thrives to shatter binary relations that describe the world in antithetic terms often perceived as gender opposites. Rabba Rotem's opposition is conveyed in her choice of referring to God in the female form; for example, she replaces "Blessed are you God" with "Blessed are you Goddess."

In this way, Rabba Rotem, who contests the central organizing principle characterized by its sharp division of the world into pairs of opposites, presents a leadership performance identity constructed on an acknowledgement of the dynamics and the interconnectedness of identities negotiating in the community. In addition, her words indicate that political discourse, a cornerstone of the queer paradigm, is inherent to her spiritual leadership:

To me, spirituality is never detached from political responsibility. I always try to create a spiritual message of personal responsibility related to Jewish history and language, and demand of everyone to act. For example, when I am writing a sermon, I refrain from opposing the occupation straightforward and use a more general message instead. Last summer for instance (during the military operation Protective Edge in Gaza, July 2014), it was important for me to say: "Image of God, we mustn't allow the killing around us to disrupt our vision. What is our responsibility and why?"

The rabba's political leadership matches the archetype of the religious leader who, with sensitivity and determination, leads her congregants to achieve common goals by influencing and motivating them to act. The analysis of Rabba Rotem's queer identity and leadership through the public prism, as opposed to the private prism, is also an opportunity to question the social order and challenge gender structures (Norman). The following is from her sermon on the Torah portion of Korach:

These days I am mainly occupied with the way in which the pluralistic, humanitarian, peaceful, anti-militaristic, anti-chauvinistic outlook is constantly under attack in Israel. The lesbian community I grew up in recognized lesbianism, feminism, and left-wing politics as its good and needed friends. I still believe the three are connected. The ways in which Palestinians, women, and LGBTQ persons are treated in Israel are connected. The violence in Israel dictates a narrow perception of reality, a polarized perception that encourages aggression among the different identities. Non-normative gender and sexuality still cause violent responses in Israel, which reach the LGBTQ communities as well. The main quantifier of the legitimacy of other people's lives in Israel is still the amount of resemblance they bear to the mainstream heterosexual, Jewish male of European descent.

Rabba Rotem is accepted and recognized by her very diverse community members due to her lesbian identity, masculine appearance – lips that fuse male divinity with a female divine presence – and use of religious male accessories (the tallit and the yarmulke)

combined with intellectualism. In the broader sense, the rabba's political-queer performance reflects the blurred boundaries and the community members' blend of identities.

Third Model: Feminist-Familyist Community Leadership Performance

The largest of the three communities discussed in this paper is the Beit Daniel community of north Tel Aviv. Beit Daniel is co-led by Galia Sadan, the community rabba, another Rabbi, and a regular cantor, who share responsibility for the organization of worship and prayer. This functionalist division of labor causes Galia to question her position as rabba:

I face the question regarding what I am. Theoretically the definition is "Co-rabba." That is the official title, though in Hebrew it is completely meaningless. Am I a rabba of the community or in the community? That is a good question. From where I stand, the situation is the same as it has always been, I am the rabba of the community. I think I hold a critical position in the community today.

Rabba Sadan has been in her community members' lives for over a decade, escorting hundreds of kids to their bar and bat mitzvah, holding circle of life ceremonies, and teaching at the beit midrash. Among her other responsibilities, she leads a group of converts and serves as their spiritual guide. Her roles allow her to situate herself in a position of authority and influence:

I wanted to live a religious life of faith with the possibility of fulfilling a leadership and educational role. To guide people. Rabbinical work entails many things I wanted to do regardless of the position. Say I aspired to become a doctor, today I'm a kind of doctor. I cure people in a different way . . . I hope I am an inspiring persona. I provide value-statements about how we should live life. I have the stage.

Rabba Sadan is celebrating her fiftieth birthday this year. Though she has spent most of her life in the big city, it seems in hindsight that the roots of her religious leadership may be traced all the way back to her childhood in Kibbutz Yehiam in Western Galilee, Israel. The concepts of membership and community are the building blocks of socialist thought. As a youngster, the former kibbutz member found herself surrounded by people struggling for a place for themselves and their values in the social order. In retrospect, it seems these values construct her community rabbinical leadership today. These values influence the way she conducts prayer, granting equal treatment to each community member:

With conviction in her eye and a tallit wrapped around her body, the rabba refers to the prayers by name, thanking one of the community members for donating the Kiddush. She then continues to recite a song by Rachel Shappira in remembrance of another community member, whose father had passed away that week. Before dedicating the prayer of good health, she mentions the names of every community member, scanning their looks with her eyes, hunting for requests and hopes while they in turn articulate the name which will soon receive a blessing from the rabba (Author's Field Diary, November 2014).

The rabba views the community as a family and the community rabbinate as a personal and intimate engagement. Her leadership performance eliminates the borders between the alienated metropolis with its dispersed districts and the safe quarters of home; in other words, the borders which separate the public sphere from the private sphere:

Community rabbinate is very intense, especially in a place like this. Only last week I guided a dying community member. Today I will guide the family during the seven days of mourning. I became this family's support in their last moments. It's all about personal attention, personal guidance. The more you nurture people through personal relations, the more they feel obligated to the community. If you guide them closely, the community will function as a family. The members of the community are often invited to my home for Shabbat and holidays, I do everything very passionately.

The topic of communities functioning as a family by answering the individual needs and as an additional structure in the social order is part of a broader sociological discussion about the family's status in contemporary society. Families and communities became increasingly responsible for the individual's wellbeing following the emergence of the neo-liberal, hyper-capitalist era and the weakening of social values. Based on her research in Samoa, the renowned anthropologist Margret Mead showed that biological parents and nuclear families have substitutes in the community.

In this case, it might be a bit hasty to claim that the Beit Daniel community serves as a substitute for the family unit, though several noticeable similarities arise from an analogue between the way Rabba Sadan and her community members experience each other and the way the family unit is experienced. The need to balance the different aspects of life may motivate women to seek part-time jobs, to work in small communities, and to avoid the position of senior rabbi of a large community. Marder claims this to be a conscious professional choice. Nevertheless, this choice limits women to low-paying positions, in which their exposure and subsequent influence is also comparably moderate. The extremely limited number of vacancies for full-time community rabbinate positions in Israel must also be taken into consideration.

Another similarity between the family structure and the community structure is in how gender power relations are conserved and metamorphosed time and again. Early feminist theories and post-feminist theories view the family as a battle field between the oppressors and the oppressed. The current family unit is a microcosm of the most fundamental class conflict in history, in which the well-being and growth of some are achieved via the oppression of others. It is not a shift in male consciousness that is required to free the oppressed; rather, what is required is that women work in the public sphere and gain financial independence. Rabba Sadan's leadership reflects that assumption, while remaining fully aware of the existing reality:

This place of work takes advantage of your weaknesses, both consciously and unconsciously. It is demanding work but extremely flexible. On the other hand, I often spend 12 hours a day here, whether it is necessary or not. Work conditions are always functional, give and take relations.

The rabba's statement corresponds with statements related to Marxist-feminism, which emphasizes that gender inequality is a consequence of men's exploitation of the female workforce, both at home and in the labor market. By choosing a "male" role, Rabba Sadan gives the role of rabbi a new and groundbreaking meaning, which often necessitates a continuous struggle for recognition and legitimization:

Of course, it is not just a role that comes with a career, it is spiritual leadership. Society is less tolerant of demanding professions when it comes to women, it is a personal toll the career takes, especially in a community like Beit Daniel. When people ask me what I do and I reply that I'm a Reform rabba, well that's not the kind of woman people rush to marry . . . who even knows that profession exists?

The gender discourse generates an obligating awareness in the religious sphere and allows the rabba to create a community ceremony in the spirit of her *reformance* (a compound of reform and performance). The praxis becomes a rhetorical tool and is enlisted to serve feminist ideology:

In my ceremonies, there is no way men will be handed a tallit and women not. There will not be a double standard. I told the community's kindergarten teacher that of course the mother is invited to light a Hanukah candle, even the entire family, and not just the dad.

Galia realizes that equality is not only necessary for correcting a social-historic injustice, but also for practicing religion. Ticochinsky, in contrast, believes that one does not need to act like a Jewish man to be a Jewish woman. She suggests women should pursue equal status through a different channel; they should use an adequate alternative, and not the existing, parallel male, framework. She claims finding the right way to manifest a feminine-Jewish world is done by more traditional reinterpretation and development of the female-religious consciousness and expressing it through Jewish sources. MacKinnon also claims that the very attempt to equalize men and women is a testament to male supremacy. Only the complete abolishment of male domination (which is how she refers to the problem) will prove useful in finding true equality, in which there is a space for womanhood based on womanhood and not on a comparison to the male standard. Though Rabba Sadan's firm stand regarding equality within the walls of the community is unequivocal, wearing a yarmulke is somewhat of a forceful symbolic statement, which poses a dilemma for her while religiously performing in the gender-constructed public space:

I no longer wear a yarmulke to weddings, because when couples hear about it, they keep their distance. I prefer to wear one, but if it's a bother, I prefer not to. It's a sociological decision, not a religious one. The yarmulke is part of it all, it's how prayer is conducted. The yarmulke says to me "you're on duty." It is important to me that the yarmulke be a female one and not just a knitted one. Not to mention how infuriating it is when a couple calls and

asks for a male rabbi to perform their wedding. I'm close to giving up . . . I don't think anyone today would dare to say he prefers a male doctor.²

Rabba Sadan attempts to balance the public and symbolic appearance of gender equality, on the one hand, with compromise and consideration towards those who struggle with the presence of a kippah (brimless cap) on the rabba's head, on the other. Eliminating this symbol of religious patriarchy from the social-cultural context while using it selectively turns the yarmulke into a symbol of resistance in the interaction between gender and religion. The battle over the feminist message and status is defeated by the rabba's flexibility regarding the use of the symbol during the ceremony. Marx adds that the exclusion of rabbas from performing wedding ceremonies also empowers them as representatives of the continuous struggle against the orthodox monopoly. The religious coercion that many Israelis experience distances them from any expression of organized religion, while a female rabba is an expression of dissidence and an affirmation that the ceremony is indeed subversive. Rabba Sadan is fighting the female fight for equal rights, she fights for recognition and for equal public and governmental support for Reform Judaism:

My reform identity is put on exhibition. I take the reformism out. We need to come out of the closet. During the celebration of the new Torah scroll last month, we went to participate in the circuits and celebrate. Here on Weizmann-Yehuda Hamaccabi St. people got up from their tables, where they were eating a bacon burger, and kissed the Torah without feeling any contradiction. Apparently, people can have religious feelings, a love for the Torah, and a connection to Judaism even if they choose to eat pork.

Rabba Sadan's reform outlook is further expressed by the transformations and adjustments she applies to the ritual and the religious symbol so that they correlate with her feminist identity. Her leadership performance emphasizes the service aspect of the community rabbinate, which provides guidance and satisfies spiritual needs as well as educational ones during rites of passage, weekends, and holidays. A great deal of Rabba Sadan's leadership performance is constructed on her obligation to maintaining the community structure by paying personal attention to the members of the community as though they were members of her own family.

Conclusion: What is a Reform Israeli Female Rabba?

This ethnographic discussion was an endeavor to decipher the voices of Reform Israeli female rabbas who create and represent a different kind of community, rabbinical, leadership performance. The rabbas' leadership not only contests the rabbinate leadership that has been safely entrusted in male possession throughout Jewish history, but also creates a spiritual-religious, gender-political discourse. The rabbas derive practices out of this discourse, which convey narratives struggling for recognition and expression in Jewish-Israeli reality.

Through their leadership performances and the phenomenological experiences, the three Rabbis challenge the traditional social categories and the roles they were assigned as

² Rabba Sadan compares the rabbi to a doctor, which emphasizes her view of her work as a savior, a source of relief and cure for the spiritual sickness that the patient (congregant) suffers.

well as reveal the tension and differences resonating among them. Rabba Raz voices a Jewish discourse that recognizes its legitimacy and that of other religious narratives. Due to her charismatic and profoundly knowledgeable leadership performance, her congregants who study at the beit midrash or attend her Shabbat services view her as a type of guru.

She blurs all distinctions between a Torah-Kabbalist sermon and a fashionable New Age sermon, and her proficiency of the text undermines patriarchal outlooks, which have attempted to deprive women of religious knowledge. She does so by focusing on faith as her main intention. On the other hand, Rabba Rotem and Rabba Sadan's voices focus on the excluded identities of the individual and their varied subsequent needs.

Rabba Rotem proves how Reform Judaism, as a minority group in Israeli society, can gain moral validation from the utmost personal aspect: her own as well as her community members' different sexual and gender identities. Upon this moral validation, she constructs her community leadership in a political context – the queer determination to cause change and their obligation towards their inner selves and others. Rabba Sadan demonstrates the dialectic process in which reform rabbinate and gender identity construct each other. As part of this framework, she believes that knowing and caring for members of the community combined with continuous spiritual guidance is the way to lead a community. A community is able to fulfill the emerging needs and overcome the social and mental voids – tasks at which the ethno-national sphere and the contemporary nuclear family are failing. Each rabba, in her own way, complies with one of the three fundamental values to which, according to Marder, women in the rabbinate are obligated: a balance between personal and professional life, enhancing intimacy for developing close and informal relationships with members of the community, and empowering those who take part in managing the community and the members themselves, thus minimalizing centralized and hierarchal relations. Each rabba perceives religion and feminism as practices that complete each other, though the attempts at combining the two discourses resulted in different approaches: one which wishes to adjust feminism to religion (as exemplified by Rabba Raz's explanation of gender equality existing in the Torah), and one which wishes to adjust religion to feminism (as exemplified by Rabba Sadan's attitude towards women wearing yarmulkes), while locating equality in religion and emphasizing it. The latter approach is also expressed through their tendency to attribute different meanings to religious practices and to eradicate the symbol (the yarmulke) of its discriminating meaning by turning it into a symbol of equality.

The rabbas' leadership performances reflect their wide range of identities without rewarding prominence to the religious identity. This is the manifestation of the assumption that their Jewish identity may not be perceived as separate from their gender identity as postmodern women. It is for this reason that more women are taking on religious leadership roles, but this is not always born of professed feminist motivations. There are female leaders who declare their approach as political-feminist and are motivated by a desire to influence the community (Gorodin), and other female leaders whose feminist orientation is virtually nonexistent (Shamir, Shtrai, and Elias).

Their gender struggle as women integrating and acting in the field of religion intersects with the Israeli Reform Movement's struggle for public legitimization and governmental funding. In a broader sense, it is a sign of acceptance and inclusion of minority groups

excluded from Israeli society, recognition, capital, and public goods. The acceptance of women in the rabbinate and their presence in public religious positions is gradually and consistently contributing to a more accepting environment towards other minority groups existing in the margins of Israeli society: people who lead untraditional family lives, such as LGBTQ, non-Jews, people of certain ethnicities, and more. Rabba Rotem meets with the LGBTQ community, excluded for their gender and/or sexual dissimilarities, and Rabba Sadan meets with converts, who are religiously excluded. It becomes apparent that the meaning of feminism today, as conveyed by the rabbas' leadership performance, is not about liberating women, but rather about liberating anyone shackled by the chains of society. For this reason, feminist research is dedicated to recognizing women as more than agents of information and victims of the patriarchal order; women are also recognized as active agents of social change. In this way, a broader ideological activist call for extended involvement of women in the various discourses is voiced through these women's leadership performances.

At this point in time, it is too early to assess the effects of these women's infiltration into the religious leadership. It is still too soon for conjecturing how rabbas will influence the many shades of Judaism and the Jewish people over time.

In a way, the feminization processes through which the rabbinate profession is going does not differ from similar processes through which other previously male dominant professions are going; as women enter these professions, they experience a simultaneous decline in prestige and salary. Nevertheless, the rabbinical profession has historically been an exclusively male profession not only due to the forces of the market, but primarily by definition and because it is a religious engagement. Therefore, the feminization of the rabbinical profession has a unique aspect. The type of leadership these women perform also has a broader context: modern organizations have been consciously moving towards less hierarchal and more democratic models of leadership. The aim is to include those who are being led in the decision-making process, to encourage and nurture interpersonal relations, to create relationships built on trust and respect, to view the leader as a mentor, and to be open to new ideas. The leadership discussed here is an accepting leadership, which include executive leaders who are not part of the cultural hegemony, such as Rabba Rotem who does not belong to the heterosexual hegemony.

In addition, this leadership is often, and perhaps appropriately, referred to as *feminine leadership*. It is clear that various types of feminine religious leaderships will indeed form in time (Keren). Perhaps they will not form in the same fields of male leadership, but rather in additional fields; perhaps not through the existing channels, but rather other, innovative channels.

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