

PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN ORTHODOXY

Editor's Note: Our community has been increasingly attentive to questions about women's roles as leaders in Orthodox life. To further this discussion, we invited four community leaders to give us their views on women's ordination and the related issue of *yoatsot halakha*, with implications for the larger questions we face as well. Each wrote independently; they did not see their colleagues' responses or the remarks of Rav Lichtenstein *zts"l* that we have included in this issue. We also include an English translation from R. Yoel Bin-Nun's recent book on R. Kook *zts"l*, which contains interesting speculation about the impact of R. Kook's approach to women's suffrage. -SC

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP Aharon Lichtenstein

We are grateful to Rav Lichtenstein's family for providing a final version of remarks presented at the 2010 RCA Convention and for agreeing to its publication in Tradition. Rabbi Dr. Aharon Lichtenstein, zts"l, was a longstanding Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshivat Har Etzion and Rosh Kollel at RIETS and the Gruss Institute.

The issue under consideration, i.e., the place of women in leadership – and, more specifically, clerical – roles, has aroused much discussion and considerable controversy, in recent decades, in both the general religious scene and in our Jewish bailiwick. It impinges upon many areas concerning the place of women – social, economic, domestic – both pragmatic and spiritual, and is, in turn affected by them. Multi-layered and multifaceted, it has wide ramifications; and yet, for us, has, first and foremost, much local meaning, and hence bears examination, with an eye to Halakhic and *hashkafic* sources and factors.

From the outset, we need to define what we regard as leadership – with respect to its constitutive essence, its functional exercise, and the mode of its attainment. With regard to all three, we may distinguish between two strands. As regards the political, socioeconomic, and cultural realms, it is generally associated with preeminence growing out of success in an area of endeavor, and confers, practically, a modicum of power. Not officially, not formally, but pragmatically. It is generally linked to forces of personality and depth of insight, both related to the ability to energize one's context, to galvanize individuals and groups, to harness charisma as a vehicle of influencing and inspiring others; to utilize talents in order to promote an agenda.

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On the other hand, there is a strand of leadership which is, formally and technically, conferred, controlled and, possibly, legislated. Whether by election or selection a person is endowed with responsibility, and, within a system which is both contextual and normative, may then serve at the interface at which the spiritual and the material converge.

What is the import of this description for the Torah world, and where does it leave committed Orthodox women who are loyal and even submissive to Halakhah, and yet many of whom are desirous for a larger share of the mantle of leadership and are clamoring for greater recognition and responsibility? Moreover, the issue is exacerbated, in one sense, and palliated, in another, by the fact that many women regard themselves as motivated, not by the more general feminist impulse for a more equitable division of control, but, rather, by genuine religious passion, by greater opportunity for leadership in *kiyyum ha-mitsvot*, in *harbatsat Torah*, in enlarging the forum for quantitatively greater and qualitatively richer religious experience.

Part of our Torah community's response had already been anticipated by a familiar *pasuk* in Proverbs (1:8), which antedates the modern era and its dilemmas by far: *Shema beni musar avikha ve-al tittosh torat immekhha*. The text does not specify what that maternal credo is. The Rav *zts"l* generally interpreted the term as referring to intuitive wisdom, the existential and experiential *bina yeteira* with which womankind has been endowed, as contrasted with the more cognitive, discursive, and often aggressive impulse which characterizes the masculine world. Surely, however, there is a leitmotif which stresses that the Torah universe, in molding its attitude to women, seeks to challenge the prevalent Western emphasis upon power as the barometer of meaning and value in life and to enhance the place of spirituality. We regard the Torah's emphasis upon the metaphysical equality of Adam and Eve at the dawn of creation, or of both genders at the covenantal encounters at Sinai or Arvot Moav, as infinitely more meaningful than the division of the pie of mastery. Our heroines are not Medea, Clytemnestra, or Lady Macbeth of Western drama, or Joan of Arc, Elizabeth the subduer of the Spanish Armada, or Catherine who westernized St. Petersburg. Ours are the *imahot*, Miriam, and Hannah, from whom we have learned how to engage in *tefillah*.

That message is crucial, and yet, for many, it does not fully satisfy. In surveying the current scene and its projected trajectory, Orthodox women express varying attitudes. Some find that scene deeply troubling, and cast the blame at the doorstep of the Halakhic establishment. Where there is a Rabbinic will, they intone, there is a Halakhic way; and if, as they insist, something is rotten in the state of Denmark, its wardens are

responsible. Given the cultural climate conducive to the efflorescence of such a feeling, its provenance is understandable; but, at the same time, thoroughly regrettable. Its accusatory charges, are, in effect, aimed at *Malko Shel Olam*, no less than at His emissaries; and the implication that only the secular establishment is sensitive to human needs and/or suffering is blatantly damning.

At the other pole, we encounter voices of those who may be equally critical of the current state of affairs, but who contend that engaging the system is pointless, as it is archaically fossilized, immune to all criticism, weighed down and frozen by the welter of its details, and totally lacking the courage or the ability to initiate rehabilitation or reconstruction. They envision passivity as “the only hope or else despair,” in Eliot’s phrase, and regard resignation or the launching of a competing store as the sole solution. This, too, is a lamentable conclusion, both because it is false – some of the most critical and most momentous aspects of human life, such as the character of intrafamilial relations are assigned to the realm of *devar ha-reshut* – and because it is immobilizing.

There are, of course, other, more moderate voices, of two different persuasions. Many more traditionally oriented women are fully satisfied, personally and communally, with the current situation, either because it meets their aspirations or because as they survey the recent damage inflicted upon the fabric of family life by tinkering innovation, are convinced that the game is not worth the candle. They appreciate the perceived fundamental stability of previous eras and are not perturbed by the price of several male reservations – and may even regard these *arei ha-leviyim* as a positive factor.

Yet, everything considered, we sense, collectively – some of us in sympathy with suggestions for greater access to leadership roles for women, and some recoiling from them – that the level of satisfaction is not quite what we desire. And, while obviously not all of the suggestions, or their rationales, are of equal worth, their prevalence per se is challenging *eizel derekh yishkon or*. How should we guide and in which direction ought we best move?

The question is both technical and substantive, tactical no less than strategic; and any attempt to approach its resolution intelligently and effectively should begin with the recognition that a facile uniform solution will not do. Communities differ widely with respect to composition, context and location, as well as in internal and broader social dynamics. They differ likewise with respect to more definitively spiritual variables – the level of Torah knowledge, of Halakhic commitment, of spiritual aspiration and direction, the nature of their desiderata and of the means

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preferred or required to attain them. They differ, hence, in their relation to their specific *mora de-atra* and to the world which he represents. Consequently, what is avidly *davar ha-nishma* in one *kehilla* may be wholly beyond the pale in another; and vice versa. *Az nidberu yir'ei Hashem: talmidei hakhamim* may and should engage in learned discourse with respect to the needs and options relevant to our topic, analyzing the advisability and pace of innovation, at a general plane; but successful implementation must allow, within Halakhic limits, for a measure of flexibility. Finally, differential sensitivity is critical in relating, with respect to our issue, to the aspirants for leadership and to their spiritual orientation, with an eye to the likely result of modes of interaction and their desired results.

In doing so, we need to sharpen our awareness of what F.H. Bradley termed, "my station and its duties;" or, in the language of the *Mesillat Yesbarim*, personal knowledge of *hovato be-olamo*. In this respect, our Torah world has been much enriched during the last generation by the significant growth of *talmud Torah* on the part of serious and committed *benot Torah*. This factor should, inter alia, help create the likelihood that informal and unlegislated leadership as manifested by women can be a positive religious stimulus, expanding Torah knowledge even as it intensifies Torah commitment. It will enable qualified women to participate in Halakhic discourse, through the written and spoken word, without raising troublesome hackles among the denizens of traditional *battei midrash*.

Admittedly, this prospect could arouse opposition by recourse to a text which, in one respect, bespeaks an attitude and, in another, directs and possibly even mandates conduct. I refer to the description *kol kevuda bat melekh penima*, which appears in a number of Halakhic contexts. This element must obviously be confronted and, as one factor among many, can exert some force even in the context I have envisioned. Moreover, some of the aforementioned applications are, in the modern world, more honored in the breach than in the observance; and this, too, may be borne in mind, although to what extent remains an open question.

With respect to some limited issues currently in debate, Halakhah of course determines our standard. However, we should, earnestly and honestly, strive to ascertain that our Halakhic judgment be sound and comprehensive. In this connection, serious and responsible *posekim*, impeccably committed and with catholicity of Torah knowledge, should, I believe, give greater weight than, in recent generations, has been assigned, to the dispensation of *la'asot nahat ruah le-nashim*, cited in the Gemara and in *Shulhan Arukh* as the basis for permitting what might otherwise have been proscribed. This is, admittedly, a possibly risky proposition, and one

can understand the reluctance of *posekim* to resort to this factor. But if we want to sustain the integrity of a *pesak*, we ought at least to give this element consideration.

The thornier problem is of course the issue of conferred or legislated leadership. In practice, this issue decomposes into two separate problems – the role of officer in a shul and *semikha* for women. For lack of time, I cannot give these questions the attention they deserve. I shall therefore have to content myself, as will the reader, with a pithy bottom line summary. I am convinced that most of the points raised with regard to the first area are readily soluble. That is not the case, however, as regards the second, which touches upon elements long abjured by either fundamental Halakhah or *minhag Yisrael*. This relates, of course, to the formal spiritual status and not to administrative roles of different character. As regards the former, holding the traditional line is, for us, very much in order.

A generation hence, this presentation – in one sense, a compromise of both divergent and possibly conflicting elements and values – may be dismissed as a grudging concession of no genuine moral weight and of no spiritual enrichment. Then again it may be read as a deft fusion of *tekhelet* and *lavan* of the Halakhic universe. In this presentation, I have attempted to set forth the guiding principles that must be considered in examining the issue at hand. A facile and simple solution is neither sufficient nor possible. It is my fervent hope that consideration of the issue at hand will reflect the complexity and sensitivity of the topic and that further discussion of these matters will be conducted in the spirit of *az nidberu yir'ei Hashem ish el re'ehu*.