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ENTITLED OR UNTITLED?

What does the contemporary “Ha-Rav ha-Gaon” have in common with the medieval Geonim? Just as the early Geonim never saw a Rashi, so too, those of today never saw a Rashi.

R. Moshe Shatzkes, the Lomza Rov

Honoring those who deserve it is not only commendable, but obligatory. “Lavish honor upon people,” taught R. Yisrael Salanter, “as if they cherished it like Esau and deserved it like Jacob.”

Packaging that honor in the form of succinct titles is as familiar and as ancient as God calling Abraham “*ha-Ivri*.” Looking for new titles to bestow upon women for their contributions to the Orthodox community might seem to be an appropriate, if not required, response to the continually expanding role they play in organized Jewish life.

But maybe not. Like all good things, titles sometimes come with a darker side, sometimes intended, and sometimes not. They can obscure important differences. Woe to the patient whose sole criterion in selecting health care is that the provider should have an M.D. after his or her name. The title can substitute for what a recipient really deserves, e.g. TIPS, the acronym for “Title In Place of Salary.”

The culture of honor-giving can even run away with itself. In drunken Purim reverie, one of the hasidim of Rabbi Aryeh Leib, the Shpoler Zeide, donned the costume of a Cossack soldier. Charging past a local church, he lopped off the head of a religious statue that stood out front. The local priest sent an ultimatum to the Zeide. The townspeople were infuriated and ready to murder the Jews. The guilty party needed to be punished. Magnanimously, he would allow the Jews to mete out the punishment themselves. If they refused, the local townspeople would vent their fury on the Jews.

The Zeide asked for a few days time, after which the priest and his flock were welcome to witness how the Jews would punish the perpetrator. At the appointed time, the non-Jews saw two rows of hasidim, all dressed like army officers, facing each other. The “criminal” was brought

forward. One of the “officers” took the guilty party’s sword and broke it in two. The criminal, head hanging low, was then forced to walk the gauntlet, as the soldiers used their swords to cut the gold buttons from his uniform.

The priest was amazed. “I knew you would have to come up with a severe form of punishment for this Jew. I did not expect it to be quite so severe!” Displays of honor can become so formalized and ritualized, that the real honor is lost in the display.

As women take larger and more important roles in public, rather than private and domestic, Orthodox life, discussion about inventing titles misses the point. It is condescending to women. The train has left the station; we should be talking about destinations, not designations. To make better use of the talents of over half of our Orthodox world, we should be encouraging participation, rather than inventing titles. The search for the next, best title for communally-committed women is a distraction that we can ill afford. It is looking for gold buttons, substituting form for substance.

The interest in new titles is certainly understandable, even if insufficiently productive. It is clear that women now serve the spiritual needs of large parts of the Orthodox community in ways that were not imagined before. We do not yet have a good sense of where this will all lead. Where are the limits and boundaries – both halakhic and meta-halakhic. Limits and boundaries aside, what roles will be good for the community and good for women? In the competition between slow-growth and quick-change models, some think that new titles offer compromise positions that can achieve consensus in the interim, and thus keep the exploration process going with minimal conflict and controversy.

It probably will not work, particularly after the recent RCA resolution that reaffirmed and strengthened the umbrella group of Modern Orthodoxy’s rejection of ordination for women. The outcome of the vote disappointed many, and some hurriedly attempted to walk it back. The fact remained, however, that the resolution attracted the largest percentage of eligible voters in RCA voting history, and the rabbinic street found female rabbis, by any other name, an unacceptable innovation for the Torah community.

Looking at that RCA resolution, we should quickly learn what any title should not look like.

In the run-up to the vote and the post-mortems that followed, we saw many different objections to the notion of Orthodox female clergy. Some were halakhic; others were decidedly meta-halakhic. Halakhic issues included both *serara* and the inability of women to participate

TRADITION

themselves in the synagogue matters that rabbis typically have to rule on. The meta-halakhic concerns were far-ranging. Some pointed to slippery slope concerns about extreme positions that could be expected of the advocates for rabbahs and maharats. Many spoke of the protocol by which any substantive change should be considered. In order to preserve that vital substance we call *mesorah*, they claim, any major deviation from past conduct, even if halakhically permissible, should first be vetted by Torah scholars of Olympian achievement.

Others focused more narrowly on the traditional definition of the *rav*, a definition they did not want to abandon. It may have found its best expression in the words of the *Arukh ha-Shulhan*, rejecting a common minimalist definition of *semikha* (i.e. a license to express a halakhic opinion in the vicinity of one's own Torah teacher, and nothing more):

According to our own times, going back to older generations, every city chooses an expert *rav* to decide halakhic matters and to judge. That person is considered the expert in the city and its environs. No other person, even if fully capable of deciding halakhic issues, is permitted to rule or judge in that locale. It is for this purpose that we award *semikha* today – to indicate that the recipient is worthy of being chosen by some city...So we have conducted ourselves from the earliest times, and far be it to change! (Yoreh De'ah, 242:29)

The author of *Arukh ha-Shulhan* sees *semikha* as indicating that the knowledge and skill of its possessor is sufficient not just to offer a competent opinion, but to become the sole decisor of a community, the place where the halachic buck stops. They believe that only years of full-time immersion in a bet midrash – after other years of skill-building – position a person to become the Torah cynosure of a community. Anything less is an affront to the profundity of halakha. The required training is far in excess of what is available to women today.¹

While all these objections to female clergy differ from one another, a consensus nonetheless emerged. The majority that voted for the RCA resolution found ordination for women jarring enough to see it as a discontinuity in the continuing journey of the Jewish people towards its

¹ Esti Rosenberg oversees some of the best programs for women in Israel. She also knows the difference between a part-time program and total immersion, having grown up on campus of Yeshivat Har Etzion as the daughter of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, zts"l. A few years ago, she wrote: "Is it possible to develop into a real Torah scholar (in the full sense of the term, and without lowering the standards of the ideal), learning four days a week until half past three? In order to produce women Torah scholars we need ten year frameworks from early morning till late at night."

historic goals. At the same time, they explicitly recommitted themselves to a 2010 resolution that declared that “the flowering of Torah study and teaching by God-fearing Orthodox women in recent decades stands as a significant achievement,” and looked to a future of even greater academic and professional participation by observant women. “The Rabbinical Council of America encourages a diversity of halakhically and communally appropriate professional opportunities for learned, committed women, in the service of our collective mission to preserve and transmit our heritage.”

All of this offers important guidance in even considering new titles for observant women. Any new title should not convey a sense of being the same as male rabbis. No rabbis-by-other-names, no rabbi wannabes, no Trojan-horse rabbis. Any title that implies the vesting of halakhic decision-making power will be a source of friction and contentiousness, and counterproductive to expanding substantive contributions by women. Any title (or program) must be honest enough to ask critical questions: Does the proposal come from a good place, one based on accepted Torah values? Or does it aim at atoning for a past that its authors see as embarrassingly chauvinistic? Alternatively, does it attempt to ape the cultural surround by offering up as much egalitarianism as possible, despite the fact that many in search of that egalitarianism will never be satisfied without the complete erasure of gender difference, something completely foreign to Torah? What else is left? Generally, we know of two kinds of titles. One licenses some kind of behavior. It attests that the bearer has attained the skills necessary to perform in a certain capacity. The other speaks of a level of accomplishment in professional service.

We are hard pressed to find areas of natively Jewish practice that require licensing that women will be interested in, other than rendering halakhic decisions.² Ordination is that license; the mainstream Orthodox community has rightfully rejected it.

Are there areas that require licensing that we have overlooked? Women have moved comfortably into many areas of rabbinic practice outside of rendering halakhic decisions and leading congregations. They teach, counsel, and administer. Would we achieve anything by inventing titles that are appropriate to these areas of more recent involvement by women?

Not without creating an artificial distinction between Orthodox women and all others. All those practice areas already have programs, degrees, and certificates associated with them and women are earning

² We anticipate few requests from women to become *shohtim* (*shohtot?*). In kashrut supervision, women already serve as kosher supervisors without the benefit of a title, just like their male counterparts.

TRADITION

them. Does a Jewish social worker, teacher, or administrator deserve a unique title because she is Jewish, when all others are doing quite well with an MSW or MA? Would this not seem contrived and paternalistic? A gifted teacher earns her degree or certificate through study and becomes the teacher of individuals through what she conveys over time. Proclaiming her Teacher or Counselor in advance of her providing those services seems terribly artificial.

Even if we were to isolate areas and skills that are particularly suited to Jewish communal life – say, a specialization in Tanakh, holding out great promise for a career in teaching – who would confer the title? Elsewhere, such degrees are granted by academic institutions, not by synagogues or communal institutions. To be sure, as more women opt for serious study of Torah texts, more institutions will offer new programs to suit their needs. Those programs will come with degrees and an increasing number of women will earn them. Those degrees will do what degrees are supposed to do – to represent to all concerned that the holders are competent and to advance the cause of their employment. The degree will suffice without need for newly-minted titles.

More valuable than new titles will be new degree programs that take advantage of women's skills and determination to serve the community. We should be able to identify bundles of skills that our community needs and values. The collection of all other functions provided by a *shul rav* besides halachic leadership comes to mind. There are rabbis and communities that would welcome a qualified woman to share the teaching and pastoral responsibilities, especially considering the new consciousness that many women simply prefer speaking to other women about a host of issues. It is easy to imagine building degree programs to train women in many of the tasks that rabbis perform, other than *pesak halakha*. (Men serving in such roles were, until recently, part of the United Synagogue (UK) landscape for decades. They were called “ministers,” rather than rabbis, although they did at times offer halakhic guidance in the absence of those with *semikha*.)

Calling such a woman an “assistant rabbi,” of course, is gauche. It assigns women to a permanent back seat; it announces that they can get as far as assistant status, without ever moving up to the senior position. So what else might we call them?

Some have suggested calling them “Rabbanit” or “Rebbetsin,” modifying the traditional moniker to include women who are not spouses of the rabbi, but serve in the same role that the wife of a community *rav* served in for centuries. In more recent times, rabbis' wives who serve in the classic role have become an endangered species. Spouses of rabbis

have opted for professional lives of their own choosing, opting out of what used to be taken for granted as their responsibility to devote themselves to the local *tsibbur*. Women not married to the congregational rabbi are prepared to step into that role. At the same time, the wives of rabbis who have stayed the course have become aware of the onerous responsibility of that role, and sought formal training for some of its components. Synagogue groups have responded with short-term, professional enhancement programs.

The novelty of this approach, however, is not the title but the program. We would be doing what is common in Protestant seminaries – structuring graduate-level programs of study that combine study of important texts and doctrines with the acquisition of pastoral skills.

Indeed, we might have much to learn from Protestants. Students – men and women – who train for community service pursue a degree, usually an M.Div. (Rendering decisions about religious law is a non-starter for them. Fealty to a set of laws is simply not part of their religious belief system.) The degree can be a prerequisite for being asked to either lead or help lead a congregation. The leader of a congregation will be called “Pastor,” – more as a description of a role than as a license or an honorific. Were we to work with this model, titles would again be beside the point. What would matter is the quality of the program and the achievement of the academic or professional degree.

We return to a point raised at the beginning. Does the community need new titles for women dedicating themselves to the community? If the title is meant to signal competence, nothing new would be needed beyond the conferring of a degree upon completion of a program of study and internship. If the purpose of the title is to honor such women for their piety in choosing such a vocation, we run the risk of igniting a turf-war between such women and those who have made different career choices, arguably for equally noble reasons. Do we really want to say that such a woman is more deserving of community honor than a physician – or a devoted mother?³

Sometimes it is the community that looks for ways to express its appreciation and needs the vehicle of a title more than the prospective recipient. But even if some decide that they wish to express appreciation to women who are pioneering new ways of enlarging women’s service

³ We don’t seem to have a tradition of bestowing honorifics on people for their adherence to the law and its principles. The title *haver*, used by German Jews and dating back to a parallel in the gemara, might be an exception. Adopting the feminine form of this for our purposes might be a linguistic mistake, given what it means in modern Hebrew.

TRADITION

to the community, there are better ways to do it than conferring titles. We generally honor people at tribute dinners, which can adequately focus on the uniqueness of the honoree. It is difficult to see how a title could do a better job.

Shortly after the RCA vote was skewered in the general media, a young woman published a plaintive critique. The RCA, she claimed, had robbed her of any motivation to stay Orthodox by denying her the ability to become a rabbi. (She later divulged that she never had been Orthodox to begin with.) Something is very much amiss when a young Jewish woman grows up feeling that the roles of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah were inadequate because they could not or did not do exactly what men did. Our fixation on titles runs the risk of undervaluing all the traditional untitled roles of women. We should not sell short the contribution of the women who encouraged their husbands during Egyptian slavery, and therefore perpetuated our people when the men were ready to give up. We should not allow the memory of the women who refused to participate in the sin of the Golden Calf and who rejected the report of the spies in the Sinai wilderness to recede. We cannot ignore the nobility of the Jewish mothers through the centuries who instilled in their children the values and tenacity necessary to thrive as Torah Jews. We should not undervalue the mothers of the well-over one million observant Jews in Israel, who raised families committed to Torah, and ensured that it was the vision of a religious community, rather than a secular one, that would have the greater clout and the brighter future in the Jewish State.

There may be no better or more meaningful title than “*bat Yisrael*.”

We might take a cue from R. Yechezkel Landau of 18th century Prague. Asked about the proper wording of *le-shem yihud* to recite before the performance of a mitzvah, he responded, “Rather than ask me the correct formula for its recital, it would be better that you should ask whether reciting it altogether is a good thing.”⁴ Do we need titles? I would argue that we will lose more in adopting them than in failing to invent them.

⁴ Responsa *Noda be-Yehudah*, Mahadura Kamma, Yoreh De’ah, 93.