

Orthodox Women's Ordination? Even Rabbis Are Split

Yeshivat Chovevei Torah panel responses underscore divisions.

Gary Rosenblatt
Editor and Publisher

"If a rabbi by definition is a teacher with knowledge, what moral justification is there to prevent women from being rabbis?"

That question was posed, in writing, to a panel of five young Orthodox rabbis, graduates of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (YCT), from an audience member on Sunday night at the rabbinical school's annual dinner, held at the Ramaz Upper School.

Alexander Kaye, rabbinic assistant at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun on the Upper East Side, elicited applause from many among the more than 300 people in attendance with his one-word reply: "None."

But his fellow panelists were not as certain, with Adam Schier, senior rabbi of Congregation Shaar Hashomayim in Montreal, and Saul Strosberg, rabbi of Sherith Israel in Nashville, Tenn., noting that while the ordination of Orthodox women may be a burning issue in the New York community, it did not have the same sense of urgency among their congregants.

Later in the discussion, Rabbi Kaye amplified his earlier response, asserting that while there may be strategic and political reasons for not having Orthodox women rabbis, he felt there was no moral basis for it.

The question, and the varied responses, underscored the uniqueness of YCT, which describes itself as an "open Orthodox" yeshiva, soon to graduate a class of 11 rabbis. Now in its ninth year, it has 45 rabbinic alumni serving in synagogues, on college campuses and as educators

across North America.

Founded and led by Rabbi Avi Weiss, spiritual leader of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale (HIR), the yeshiva prides itself on bucking the prevailing trends in the Orthodox world of insularity, centralized rabbinic power and a certain narrowness of halachic interpretation, according to Rabbi Weiss.

In his address at the dinner, he said YCT teaches "inclusivity" and emphasizes autonomy for its rabbis, asserting that "centralized rabbinic power is dangerous because it inevitably leads to abuse."

(Though a member of the Rabbinical Council of America, the mainstream group of Orthodox rabbis, he charges that it has given in to pressure from the Chief Rabbinate in Israel on conversion and other issues.)

The issue of ordaining women is a delicate one for Rabbi Weiss, who is about to hold a "conferral ceremony" for a young woman on the completion of the same training program that YCT's male rabbinical students undertake. The woman, Sara Hurwitz, who now serves as "madricha ruchanit," or spiritual mentor, at Rabbi Weiss' synagogue, will receive "a new title reflective of her religious and spiritual role," according to the synagogue. But it won't be "rabbi."

Those close to Rabbi Weiss say that he would like to give Hurwitz the full rabbinic title but feels that to do so would marginalize his yeshiva in the mainstream Orthodox community and, in practical terms, make it more difficult for its graduates to find posts at Orthodox institutions.

A highlight of the Sunday evening panel discussion, moderated by this reporter, was the response to an audience member's hypothetical question of whether Bernard

Madoff would merit being called to the Torah if he attended synagogue.

Rabbi Schier was adamantly opposed, saying Madoff's financial crimes were "evil" and he was not sure he should even be admitted entrance to synagogue. But Rabbi Strosberg said every Jew is entitled to repent for sins and to take part in the services.

The panel included two rabbinic educators: Avidan Freedman, a member of the Judaic studies faculty at the SAR Academy High School in Riverdale, who spoke of the challenge of empowering students, and David Wolkenfeld, director of the Jewish Learning Initiative at Princeton University, who addressed the need to reach both observant and unaffiliated students on campus.

Howard Jonas, a prominent businessman and chair of YCT known for his provocative and disarmingly blunt remarks, did not disappoint the audience in his address at the dinner. He said "these are good times, not bad times" because Iran, which threatens to eradicate Israel, has been severely hampered by oil prices at \$40 a barrel. If the situation continues, Jonas said, regimes like Iran and Russia "will collapse."

In an implicit criticism of Jewish institutions that have had large endowments, Jonas said he agrees with Rabbi Weiss, who once told him that "synagogues should always be broke" because "it is not right to pile up money" in endowments "when there are real needs" to be met.

Jonas got the biggest laugh of the night when he stated in jest that he had conferred with the rabbinic panelists and they had agreed that Ruth Madoff could be called to the Torah. ■