

A response to the Orthodox Union's statement on women clergy

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Several people have asked me my thoughts on the Orthodox Union's recent statement regarding women clergy. As you know, the advancement of women's leadership and scholarship provides one of the fundamental tenets that make Shalhevet High School what it is. The topic also is important to me on a personal level. I am proud to daven frequently at B'nai David-Judea, a synagogue that employs a female clergy member. My wife has spent this year in Jerusalem studying to become a Yoetzet Halacha. I routinely use my soapbox to call for progress on a host of issues triggering difficult halachic discussions – including women's issues, LGBT issues, and more – and have received a good deal of flak for those stances.

And yet, I find the resentment towards the Orthodox Union, and these Rabbis in particular, in reaction to this statement, somewhat exaggerated and unfair. Please do not misunderstand me – I have issues with the statement. But I look at the response to this statement (mostly on social media and in private emails) and I see a lot of knee-jerk reactions instead of carefully considered critique. I see individuals demonizing the rabbis who penned the statement, decrying their chauvinism, and declaring their standing on the wrong side of history. Many people I have spoken to do not seem to have read the piece carefully, if at all.

You don't agree with the decision? Great. Disagree! That is the Jewish way, the Talmudic way, which has charted our course for millennia. I understand that this statement is painful for many people. But let's not jump to assume the worst about those with whom we disagree. Let's avoid assuming that its authors acted in bad faith. Rather, collect your thoughts, respond point-by-point, identify what you consider to be any logical missteps, and advance the dialogue on this important issue. All too often these days, people don't just disagree– they demean, malign, reject and delegitimize. The rabbinic authors of this statement are talmidei chachamim who are filled with ahavat Yisrael, and think day and night about the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of the Jewish people.

As I have written in the past on numerous occasions, we need not agree on every issue. I respect and admire Rabbi Kanefsky tremendously. I consider him a role model and a true tzaddik. Rabbi Kanefsky disagrees with the Orthodox Union decision, which is his right. Just as Rabbi Kanefsky retains the prerogative to diverge from the OU's line of reasoning, so too does the OU have the prerogative to make public that decision and rationale.



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I understand the opinion that people often will use halacha to confirm a certain predisposition to an issue. But that is an oversimplification of the halachik process. Halachik decisors draw not only on precedent and clear-cut textual sources but on what they take to be the spirit that animates the halachik system in its totality, a spirit that they have drawn from a comprehensive study of halacha and its sources. Similarly, those who earnestly seek to expand the role of women generally do so in an attempt to advance what they consider to be the goals of the halachik system. We can disagree without arguing that the other side is acting in bad faith.

Given that this debate implicates the overall values of the halachik system, there is enough “give” in centuries of Biblical commentary, Talmudic discourse and Halachik Responsa to justify opposite conclusions on the issue of women clergy. And what’s true of the debate over women clergy is true of a wide variety of other halachik issues that draw upon the relative weight we place on the wide range of halachik values within our tradition. But the existence of multiple values in no way diminishes the integrity of halachik analysis.

Both the supporters and detractors of the OU’s statement approach this issue with important and valid halachik values essential for any honest and thorough conversation over the role of women within the clergy. Let us focus on what both sides in this debate share in common. A deep commitment to halacha and a recognition that in the year 2017 there is a need for an expanded role for women in synagogue leadership. The OU document, while saying no to women rabbis, carves out a much greater amount of space for women to serve and lead. This is significant given the community from which the document emanates. Yes, many would love to see more; yes, many feel that women rabbis are acceptable in halacha. Let’s argue, but by all means let’s also recognize how much common ground the two sides of this debate share. The value of honoring Mesorah (tradition) and making religious leadership available to women can both be seen as Torah objectives; the relative weight we give to those values can each support honorable Torah worldviews. And precisely because each worldview comprises Torah values, each position will find halachik support. Should we bemoan this reality? I don’t think so. It speaks to the complexity and depth of the Jewish tradition. We are a tradition of debate, not of unanimity.

There is one reality, however, that we should bemoan: our inability to debate with dignity and respect. We have lost our ability to have genuine empathy for any side that disagrees with our worldviews. If the Jewish community joins our current society at large in choosing this direction, then I struggle to see how we will heal the wounds that have formed in this toxic atmosphere we have created.

When the rest of the world is going so low, should not the Jewish community go high? Does our mission not contain the mandate to shine a light unto the world? If we do nothing but emulate the coarse ways of a polarized world, then who are we?

Modern Orthodoxy can lead the way in shining a Jewish light unto the world. Our rabbinic leadership must begin to define its movement in positive, as opposed to negative terms. Our decisors must describe for us what we as Modern Orthodox Jews can and should be, a vision to which we can aspire, as opposed to offering a steady diet of restrictive pronouncements. Far too many Orthodox Jews feel that the rabbis only show up periodically to offer a “slap on the wrist” when societal norms have gone too far afield. This does not inspire a greater reverence of, and commitment to, halacha. Rabbi Soloveichik, with his writing of the Lonely Man of Faith and other works, inspired a generation. Rav Aharon Lichtenstein and Rav Amital’s writings inspired yet another generation. While they said no at times, and yes at others, everyone was inspired by them, saw their humanity and sensitivity and understood that they were torn and pained at times when they had to say no.

Developing empathy for both sides should be the starting point for dignified debate. Without that, we rush into another one of those communal food fights that throws out lots of heat and generates little light. We are better than that. We should be better than that. Our ancestors did not struggle for millennia to see their descendants turn into dogmatic warriors who constantly turn on each other.

So, this is a call for dignified debate, for radical moderation. This is a call for empathy before judgement. This is a call for reasoned rebuttal. Finally, this is a call for us to shine a Jewish light unto the world, no matter how deep our disagreements.

Are we up to the challenge?

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