

# When Tradition Is Not What Is Best

By **DINA BRAWER**

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The Orthodox Union's new policy barring women, whether ordained or not, from serving in clergy roles has been received by many with dismay but not surprise.

Orthodox Judaism, like most religions, seeks stability in what it considers enduring traditional values. This finds expression in resisting the pressure to conform to a changing society. Those who oppose women's ordination, do so on the basis that it is not 'traditional.' However until the early twentieth century it was not traditional for women to study Torah at all. Generations of observant Jews deprived their daughters of a Torah education believing that this was in line with tradition, which in fact, it was. But traditions can and ought to change. In 1917 a far sighted Jewish seamstress, Sarah Schenirer, recognized that the tradition of keeping girls ignorant was undermining the future of Orthodox Judaism and she addressed the problem by founding what eventually became Beis Yaacov, the first network of Orthodox Jewish schools for girls.

And yet, while Schenirer's school system was a great success it stopped short of teaching girls Talmud which was traditionally seen as a discipline reserved only for male students. That too changed in the second half of the twentieth century when Rav Joseph B Soloveitchik introduced Talmud study for girls in the schools under his aegis. Today it is traditional in many Orthodox circles for women to study Talmud on a level that matches that of their male peers. And indeed the OU statement takes this for granted. Yet it steadfastly refuses to accept that the tradition of rabbinic ordination might be extended to include able women.

While tradition is an important element of Orthodox Judaism, it has, at critical moments, given way to radical innovation. Orthodox Judaism is not a static tradition, but rather by the wisdom of knowing when to maintain tradition and when to amend or reject it with innovation.

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what has become known as the ‘tragedy of the red trousers.’

In the lead up to WWI, as warfare shifted from fighting at close quarters to heavier artillery fired from greater distance, it became advantageous to conceal soldiers for as long as possible. The British and German armies reacted to this change by exchanging their bright colored uniforms for drab grays and browns. The French soldiers however, still wore the same red caps and trousers, marking them out as easy targets. The suggestion of the French war minister Adolphe Messimy that his armies do likewise was met with ridicule and resistance. The red trousers represented army pride and prestige and military traditionalists were not prepared to give it up. At a parliamentary hearing, a former War Minister, Eugene Etienne, spoke for France. “Eliminate the red trousers?” he cried. “Never! *Le pantaloen rouge c’est la France!*”

“That blind and imbecile attachment to the most visible of all colors,” wrote Messimy afterward, “was to have cruel consequences.”

Faith leaders grappling with women’s inclusion in religious leadership roles are in danger of the same pitfall. By focusing exclusively on ‘what is traditional’ for their religion rather than asking the crucial question, ‘what change is necessary for religion to thrive?’ they risk alienating 50 per cent of their flock. They also deprive the entire community of the talent, skills, and enthusiasm that women would otherwise contribute.

Insisting that men continue to wear the trousers when it comes to religion might be traditional, but, as the *pantalons rouge* debacle illustrates, it may not be worth the price.

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