



## **Despite Ban, These Orthodox Jewish Clergywomen Are Determined To Serve Carol Kuruvilla**

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*Not even a ban from the religious establishment will stop these women from fulfilling their calling.*

The Orthodox Union, one of the largest networks of Orthodox Jewish synagogues in America, recently adopted a policy that bans women from serving as clergy.

Opinions about whether women should be allowed to serve as clergy have caused some division within America's Modern Orthodox Jewish community. The religious establishment, including the OU's counterpart, the Rabbinical Council of America, is strongly opposed to women's ordination. On the other hand, some OU synagogues have embraced the idea of women clergy.

The new policy attempts to clear up the confusion. But despite the enforcement of this glass ceiling, Orthodox women who have felt the pull to serve as spiritual leaders aren't backing away from their calling.

Rabba Sara Hurwitz is the co-founder and Dean of Yeshivat Maharat, an Orthodox Jewish seminary that ordains women as clergy. The school has graduated 14 female clergy and 28 others are currently students. Hurwitz told The Huffington Post that nine of their graduates are currently employed in synagogues. She said students remain committed to "learning, teaching, being a pastoral presence for people in their time joy and vulnerability, and being a role model for others."

"Their reaction [to the policy] is to keep marching forwards, fulfilling their passion to become clergy," she wrote in an email.

The OU's decision comes down to a difference in opinion about God's will for men and women.

According to a statement, OU leaders said that they had been approached by Orthodox rabbis and lay leadership for definitive guidance about women's ordination. The OU placed the question in front of a group of seven modern Orthodox rabbis. After months of reviews and forums with community members, the panel concluded that more should be done to encourage women towards leadership positions. However, their interpretation of Jewish law found that men and women have different gender roles and obligations when it comes to serving in a synagogue.

OU leaders argued that the idea of gender equality in religious practice "inexorably clashes" with the Orthodox interpretation of Jewish scripture. In their worldview, individual autonomy must always submit to the will of God, as interpreted by rabbinic leaders.

The rabbis agreed that women can serve as administrators, educators, and counselors. They can even advise other women about Jewish law as it relates to marriage, sexuality and women's health.

But on the matter of ordination, the rabbis concluded that women weren't allowed.

As a result, the OU adopted a policy on February 1 that discourages member synagogues from employing women clergy, or allowing women to perform tasks typically associated with clergy — such as officiating at significant life-cycle events, delivering sermons from the pulpit, and serving as a synagogue's primary religious teacher.

Instead of focusing on what women are prohibited from doing, the leaders asked the community to focus on what women are allowed to do.

Moishe Bane, the OU's new president, told The Huffington Post in a statement:

"The OU Board understands that the OU synagogues that currently have women clergy on staff have retained these individuals in order to address various, specific community needs. The Board of the OU is optimistic that substantially all of these needs can be met within the very broad parameters of synagogue roles that the Rabbinic Panel concluded were appropriate to be provided by women, if so determined by the synagogues rabbinic and lay leadership."

But some female Orthodox clergy are determined not to let these restrictions stop them from acting as spiritual leaders.

Maharat Ruth Balinsky Friedman, an ordained spiritual leader at Washington D.C.'s Ohev Sholom - The National Synagogue, told The Huffington Post that she's determined to keep doing her job.

"I am grateful to have an extremely supportive community, and so this decision does not affect me personally. However, some of my colleagues are personally affected, and this decision caused them a lot of upset and worry," she told The Huffington Post in an email. "Therefore, my top reaction is one of anger. That these rabbis made this decision without considering the effects it would have on the women who are currently serving as clergy, or who are training to serve, is disgraceful."

The OU's press office confirmed to The Huffington Post that the rabbinic panel did not hear from ordained Orthodox female clergy during its review process.

The Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, a group that advocates for expanded roles for women within the community, was "dismayed" by the OU's decision.

"There are various ways of practicing Judaism, halachic Orthodox Judaism," Sharon Weiss-Greenberg, the group's executive director, told the Forward. "We are disappointed, however, that the OU is attempting to squash that healthy debate and impose their [religious ruling] on hundreds of synagogues, thus centralizing power... and not giving autonomy to communities' lay and professional leaders."

Bracha Jaffe, a member of Yeshivat Maharat's Class of 2017, is still hoping to take the title of "rabba" after her ordination this year. She told The Huffington Post that she feels the forum doesn't reflect the diversity within the Orthodox community. She said the OU's decision has encouraged her and her colleagues to "do our work in a more public fashion" to raise their visibility.

"Visible female clergy presence in Orthodox synagogues lends validity to women's participation, gives voice to the women's side and creates a welcoming space and role models for women of all ages in our synagogues," Jaffe told The Huffington Post. "Let us not deprive the Orthodox world of what these talented and dedicated women have to offer!"

*UPDATE: This article has been updated with comments from the Orthodox Union.*