

## **Women Leaders Respond to Prohibitive Orthodox Ruling**

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Modern Orthodox community leaders who favor women serving as clergy say they intend to continue advocating for them despite a ruling by the Orthodox Union (OU) last week that bars member synagogues from hiring women.

“My response is to continue teaching Torah and inspire others to connect to our mitzvot, to each other, and to HaShem,” said Rabbanit Alissa Thomas-Newborn of B’nai David-Judea, the first woman to serve as an Orthodox clergy member in Los Angeles.

Her view was echoed by Rabba Sara Hurwitz, co-founder and dean of Yeshivat Maharat in New York, the first yeshiva to ordain women as Orthodox Jewish clergy, including Thomas-Newborn.

Hurwitz said in a phone interview, “We remain resolute to continue to train and ordain and place our women in synagogues, college campuses and organizations, and we also know that there is a communal need for the voice, the unique voice that women bring to communities, and we think that the communities will be better off with male and female leadership.”

While Yeshivat Maharat is not governed by OU policy, B’nai David-Judea is, and its decision to ignore the ruling could have implications for its future relationship with the OU, a New York-based umbrella organization for Orthodox life with approximately 400-member synagogues as well as programs related to kosher food, youth and college campus life.

“BDJ has a longstanding positive relationship with the OU, and we hope to continue to in the future,” Thomas-Newborn said.

B’nai David-Judea is the only Los Angeles Orthodox synagogue with a female clergy member and one of only four in the United States.

The Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA), which advocates for an expanded female leadership role in Orthodox life, denounced the OU ruling, saying, “We are confused as to why this is being raised now after women have been serving as halakhic spiritual leaders in OU synagogues for well over a decade.”



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JOFA Executive Director Sharon Weiss-Greenberg said female clergy members can often serve in ways in which their male counterparts might be less effective, such as counseling women on issues pertaining to sexuality.

“There are various topics where women would rather speak to women, especially given the gender dynamics in the Orthodox community,” she said. “Certainly I would say it’s true when it comes to laws about sex and ... family purity.”

She said she also found it troubling that none of the seven members of the OU panel that decided against female clergy were women. Nor, she added, were women even consulted. “That speaks to the problem,” she said.

The OU’s self-described mission is “to engage, strengthen and lead the Orthodox Jewish community, and inspire the greater Jewish community.”

According to its 17-page ruling on female clergy, “Legal sources, historical precedent and the halakhic ethos” informed the panel’s decision, which echoes a 2015 statement by the Rabbinical Council of America, an association of Orthodox rabbis.

“We feel that the absence of institutionalized women’s rabbinic leadership has been both deliberate and meaningful, and should continue to be preserved,” it said. “This restriction applies both to the designation of a title for women that connotes the status of a clergy member, as well as to the appointment of women to perform clergy functions on a regular ongoing basis — even when not accompanied by a rabbinic type title.”

Thomas-Newborn’s responsibilities at B’nai David-Judea include delivering sermons, providing pastoral care and officiating lifecycle events. She is excluded from being counted toward a minyan, leading services and reading from the Torah before the congregation.

She said she has received widespread support from her community, following the OU’s decision “from BDJ and beyond, including from other Orthodox individuals in L.A. as well as from those of other denominations.”

She addressed the ban briefly at the beginning of her most recent Shabbat sermon, while the synagogue’s head rabbi, Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky, who has also denounced the OU ruling, was in Israel on a study trip. (In an opinion piece published on page 12, he called her sermon “an act of sacred civil disobedience.”)

“Over the past Shabbat, I expressed my gratitude to our community, and then taught on the Parsha, which is my duty and great joy,” Thomas-Newborn said.

Women have served as rabbis in the Reform movement since the 1970s and in the Conservative movement since the mid-1980s. While Orthodox Judaism has traditionally resisted naming women to clergy positions, an activist strain of Orthodox Judaism, known as Open Orthodoxy, has attempted to transform attitudes toward female leadership within the movement.

The OU ruling says women play an important role in Jewish life. It describes ways women who are interested in leadership positions can be involved, whether it is serving as a scholar-in-residence, working as an educator or being a synagogue staff member. Furthermore, it encourages women to educate themselves — to learn *halachah* — and use that knowledge of Jewish law to serve in leadership positions in their respective synagogue communities.

“The spiritual growth of our community is dependent upon a steady stream of talented women both serving as role models and teachers, and filling positions of influence,” the ruling says.

A synagogue faces two requirements in becoming eligible for OU membership: the synagogue must use an Orthodox *siddur*, and the synagogue must have in its worship space a *mechitzah*, a divider between male and female worshipers. Therefore, to issue statements regarding the hiring of clergy at synagogues is “not what the OU is really here for,” Weiss-Greenberg said.

Some critics of the ruling and accompanying statement have said it undermines the autonomy of individual synagogues. OU Executive Vice President Allen Fagin, however, disputes that.

“It’s important to stress the determination of the OU’s board was to adopt those responses [the OU ruling] as a statement of OU policy. We weren’t there to define for any particular synagogue how it was required to behave — that’s a determination the synagogues and their lay leadership need to make,” Fagin said in a phone interview. “What we were defining is OU policy.”