

Ignore the OU — Orthodox Women Rabbis are Here to Stay

Shira Eliassan

Originally published by [The Forward](#)
February 8, 2017

When the Orthodox Union released their statement on female clergy last week, I was not particularly upset. I was not sad, I was not angry, and I was not anxious. I felt perhaps a tinge of frustration, coupled with a disappointment that had been dulled by months and months of expectation. As a staff member at the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA), I had learned about the OU's decision to release a statement over the summer. And as a resident of Washington Heights, I had already spoken to Rabbi Ezra Schwartz, senior rabbi at Mount Sinai Jewish Center, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva University, and one of the members of the OU's rabbinic panel, multiple times. I did not need to read the psak or the statement to know what the decision would be.

But by last Thursday, I was more frustrated by the fact that the OU released a statement that was size 11 font and triple spaced than by the actual content of the document. Because by Thursday, I realized that the statement is irrelevant.

It's irrelevant because three weeks ago 1,200 people gathered at the JOFA Conference to hear Rabbi Lila Kagedan - a woman who serves as the senior rabbi at an Orthodox synagogue - assure us that the state of Orthodox female rabbis is strong. For 1,200 people across 24 states and four continents, Orthodox female rabbis are no longer a dream - they are a fact.

The most exciting statistic from the conference was not the fact that we increased our total numbers by over 20%, or that we had 25% male participation. It's the fact that the largest age demographic by more than double was young people between the ages of 15 and 29. While there was an even distribution across nearly every age bracket (30-39, 40-49, 50-59, and 60-69), over 25% of the conference attendees were under the age of 30.



dedicated learning. dynamic leadership.

What this means is that in the coming years, when these 300-plus young people become dues-paying synagogue members, board members, and shul presidents, it will no longer be a question of whether or not they will hire a woman to serve as part of their shul's clergy staff - it will be an expectation. When we take over for our parents as the gatekeepers of Orthodoxy, we will no longer bar female rabbis from entering. We will be inviting them to our pulpits with open arms.

The fight for female rabbis is far from over, but the OU's recent statement poses no threat to the longevity or success of this movement. In their psak, the esteemed rabbis of the OU's rabbinic panel used the principle - "go out and observe the common practice" (Eruvin 14b) to suggest that the status quo in some way impacts our halakhic practice.

Indeed, it is time for the institutional centers of Orthodoxy to open their own eyes and see what 1,200 other people saw in the initial moments of this year's JOFA Conference. The status quo is changing - and not just in the liberal pockets of Modern Orthodoxy. Dozens of gifted, dedicated women are assuming their rightful places at the heads of Orthodox communities all over the world. And no bureaucratic statement will be able to stem those tides of change.