

## Some Problems Ahead

DAVID M. FELDMAN

ABOARD THE AIRLINER FLYING BACK HOME from the 1979 Convention of the Rabbinical Assembly in Los Angeles, I reflected on the passionate pleas made there by some of my colleagues on behalf of the proposal to ordain women in the Conservative Movement. They appealed to morality and justice, to equality of opportunity for women to fulfill themselves spiritually and professionally. The arguments tugged at the heart and I concluded, at that lofty altitude, that I should join hands with the advocates of this worthy proposal.

Arriving home, I came to my Synagogue in Brooklyn that Thursday morning, found myself the tenth to the Minyan, donned Tallit and Tefillin, led the congregation in prayer, and read the Torah portion. The dawn then struck: what, I asked myself, had I almost done? What was I about to agree to? As of now, women put on neither Tallit nor Tefillin, they do not serve as cantors or Torah readers, nor are they counted in the Minyan in many places. Aside from this last, the other practices are hardly widespread in our Synagogues and have, in any case, not been resolved by the Law Committee. How, then, could the Movement sanction so revolutionary a step? Unless our idea of the Rabbi is of one who teaches, preaches, and does pastoral work, to the exclusion of these ritual functions — or unless we have decided to abandon evolutionary Conservatism for revolutionary Reform — we cannot allow ordination of women in our Movement. To do so, it seems clear to me, would be to ride roughshod over several intermediary steps, and to flout the halakhic due process on the way; it would be to shrug at halakhic strictures, and leapfrog over the unresolved issues. Worse, to do so would be to resolve those issues forcibly and imperiously. It would not only accelerate the speed but pre-judge the direction in which these issues would ultimately be resolved.

Such a move can only be construed as an affront to rabbis and congregations committed to retaining traditional practices. Synagogues that follow the ritual and liturgical procedures of a traditional Sabbath Morning Service will find themselves out on a limb, forever having to justify an arrangement now implicitly rendered both out of step and out of favor. If the spiritual fountainhead of the Movement were now to declare that a woman can be ordained as a rabbi, then any congregation that declines participation of women on the Bimah — in a sincere attempt to preserve

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DAVID M. FELDMAN is rabbi of the Jewish Center of Teaneck, Teaneck, New Jersey.

the traditional character of its worship services — will be made to look both reactionary and slow to learn, behind the times of today's world and blind to the example set by our Seminary as spiritual leader.

Then there are the problems for the woman herself. The position of traditional synagogues will have been made untenable by having placed the woman in a position which must be equally untenable. How can she, I ask, declare herself a "Conservative rabbi"? What will she be "conserving"? Since she will not be conserving traditional ritual and liturgical practice; since she will be standing in a position with no historical precedent; since she will necessarily represent not a recognized tradition but an abrupt departure therefrom, how can she call herself "Conservative"? Is this not a contradiction in terms from the standpoint of logic, and a confusion of soul from the standpoint of personhood?

That's why the halakhic issues are only part of the problem. Zacharia Frankel walked out of the Reform conclave in 1845 because the delegates proposed that praying be done in the European vernacular rather than Hebrew. The halakhah has no objection: we may pray in any language. But Frankel understood that this was a radical break with vertical and horizontal bonds, the connection to the past and Klal Yisrael everywhere. He wanted to maintain the extra-halakhic, if undefinable, historic character of Judaism, and came to help launch the Conservative Movement.

I don't think we have been committed to "conserving" just to be stubborn. We have conserved our Tradition because we see value and life-enhancing quality in both its content and form. A distinctive feature of this Tradition has been its sex-role division. But until the dust settles on the current feminist upheaval, which, we hope, will banish oppressive sexism but refine our appreciation of sex roles and family, we ought not be deprived of a re-enforcing model in a fragmented society. The Synagogue, the last bastion of Jewish moral and social teaching, should not join the surrender to that most unJewish and most untraditional heresy: that home and family are not primary.

If the decision to ordain does pass, new challenges will devolve upon the Right Wing within the movement. To avoid an actual split and to preserve our cherished pluralism and unity within diversity, we will, consciously, have to assert ideological independence from the Center and the Left. Only then will we be able to resist the subtle and unsubtle influences of a Movement turning officially and dramatically leftward.

But an equally great challenge will be to do what we should have been doing for some time now — namely, to help forge alternative modes of participation and leadership in the Jewish religious community, in harmony with existing or evolving halakhic norms and patterns of structure. Since being "plugged in" to traditional sources can be far more sustaining than being disconnected therefrom, apparent gains in liberalism or modernity notwithstanding, it becomes our task faithfully to preserve this way of life and creatively to make it more satisfying.