

On the Seam between Spirituality and Activism

Azila Talit Reisenberger
University of Cape Town

The first time I was consciously aware that I was Jewish was when a group of Cypriot young people came as exchange students to our high school in Tel-Aviv. The most tantalising fact for us Israeli teenagers was that they were probably not circumcised.

Identifying these young men as the “other” made me interrogate my own religion: what does it actually mean to be Jewish? Until then it was an unquestionable part of me, like my blue eyes or my gender — something that I was, but not something that involved doing anything “religious”. Indeed, every Friday we went to the grandparents, but we had always seen it as a family gathering rather than the religious ritual of welcoming the *shabbat*. Every Yom Kippur, rather than perceiving it as the Day of Atonement, the holiest of all holy days, we played hopscotch on the highway, as the empty, car-less road was a novelty; and at Passover the only place to get bread was at the Arab bakery in Jaffa — all Jewish bakeries took their annual leave during this week, as they were forbidden to sell any bread.

Some three decades later, when I became acting rabbi at Temple Hillel, the Progressive Jewish community in East London, South Africa, I had to admit to my congregants that before coming to South Africa, I had never been inside a synagogue. When our grandparents went to synagogue, all the grandchildren went with them, but we stayed outside to play on the sidewalk with the other children. Occasionally we heard the *shofar* being blown, or special communal prayers that were louder than our peers’ shrieks, but the spiritual meaning of these was lost on us.

So what caused this change, and what was my course from zero participation in religious activities to full participation and total commitment?

It started when I came to South Africa. During the first Passover in Cape Town, the only way to alleviate my sense of loneliness was to look for a synagogue where other people were like me and celebrated this important holiday. I found a synagogue in Sea Point, and when the whole community stood up and recited with one voice, *She'ma Ysrael Adonay Eloheynu, Adonay Echad* — “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One” — I realised the meaning of belonging. After that, whenever I was lonely at sunset on Fridays, I went to the synagogue. As time went by and I grew more familiar with the traditional rules and rituals, I became more selective and sought the more progressive congregations where I could sit on the ground floor with everybody. In Orthodox synagogues, women are forced to sit upstairs in *ezrat ha'nashim*, the section assigned to women only.

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs states that after basic physical needs for food and shelter have been met, the next most urgent need is to belong. According to this eminent psychologist, the need to belong includes the needs for esteem: for achievements, prestige, and status. Only when these “esteem needs” are satisfied does one tend to address one's spiritual needs and to search for the Beyond.¹

And so in those early Cape Town days, my membership of the local religious community emanated from so-called “inferior”, rather than lofty, motives: the need to belong, rather than a spiritual search for the Beyond.

But God works in mysterious ways.

To supplement my income I started to teach in the *chedder*, preparing young Jewish children for their *bar* and *bat mitzvahs*.² I had to gain more knowledge, particularly regarding the details of the synagogue services and various Jewish rituals. What I learned fascinated me, and made me aware of how ignorant I was. I decided to be proactive; when I enrolled for my undergraduate degree at the University of Cape Town I took Hebrew, Jewish, and Biblical Studies as my majors. By the time I had written my M.A. and Ph.D. theses I felt more comfortable with my knowledge of Hebrew and Judaism, but did not yet distinguish between cognitive and emotional knowledge.

What I learned also angered me. Growing up in a home that had no trace of gender preference one way or the other, I was dismayed at the many laws that discriminate against Jewish women. I started writing papers exposing many discriminatory issues.³ At the same time I developed a curriculum to include courses on gender and religions, in order to focus students' attention on the problems at hand. I engaged in debates with Jewish men (especially rabbis) who disagreed vehemently with my liberal ideas. On occasion, I

provoked the wrath of Orthodox men — and, surprisingly, also women — who felt the need to defend *their* rabbis from my heretical ideas.⁴

I was very involved in a campaign that dealt with the unfair laws pertaining to the *get*, the divorce paper that Jewish men have to give their wives in order to free these women to remarry in the future. For this purpose I joined hands with the Union of Jewish Women to petition the South African judicial system, and we secured a landmark ruling in support of South African Jewish women. This is the first country in the world where civil courts have helped Jewish women with religious marital law.⁵

That said, I had to suffer some consequences. When my firstborn son joined the *chedder* in preparation for his *bar mitzvah*, the rabbi asked him cynically if his mother “approved of it”. That was the last time any of my children set foot in an Orthodox synagogue. To prepare them for their *bar* and *bat mitzvahs* I started my own *chedder* classes at the primary school in our suburb. I provided free services to all the Jewish children at the school, teaching boys and girls exactly the same curriculum. But all this was driven by cognitive decisions, rather than by spirituality.

And then came the “eureka” moment. It all started when my mentor, head of department and colleague at the University of Cape Town, Professor Israel Ben-Yosef, told the Progressive community in East London that they should approach me to lead them in prayers. The late Prof. Ben-Yosef used to supplement his academic salary by occasionally flying to East London to act as the rabbi and lead the Progressive community of Temple Hillel. He later fell in love with his religious role as a community spiritual leader and decided to abandon his academic career and become a full-time rabbi.

Owing to Prof. Ben-Yosef’s vast knowledge as a professor of Hebrew and Jewish studies and his experience as an acting rabbi, he was able to attend the Leo Beck College in London for only two of the seven years normally required in order to get an ordination in the Progressive Movement. When he took leave of his beloved community in East London, he advised them to contact me to help them run their services. And that was when I got an urgent phone call to lead Temple Hillel during the high holidays in 1990. The leaders of the community accepted Prof. Ben Yosef’s enthusiastic recommendation blindly, and bought me air tickets for both the Jewish New Year and the Day of Atonement, ten days later.

I was touched by the fact that they wanted me to lead a congregation over the Days of Awe, such an important time of the Jewish year. I was further touched by the fact that they were prepared to fly me in twice — I was lecturing at the University of Cape Town and could not take off ten full days. So I decided not to let them down.

I went to the chief rabbi of the Progressive Movement in South Africa at

the time, Rabbi Dr. David Sherman, and asked him to direct me as to what exactly would be expected of me. He gave me an old-fashioned book of prayer, which we had to read, cover to cover, during these two holidays. I practised the old-fashioned English, trying to master the pronunciations of “thou”, “didst”, “dost”, etc., and I looked for inspirational material for the many sermons I had to give.

As the community had never seen me before (and in 1990 the concept of “googling” somebody or checking such sites as Wikipedia for photos did not exist), the East London community did not know what to expect. The welcoming committee saw two women disembarking from the aircraft in East London: a matronly woman of about 70, and a woman in her mid-30s in jeans and T-shirt. I knew what was about to happen, but was too late to stop the committee from approaching the bewildered old woman. But when I revealed that I was the rabbi, I was duly welcomed. And then we observed each other discreetly, as a couple does on a first date.

On the way from the airport to town I explained that I take no money for religious services, because the Talmud does not allow religion to become a tool for earning money⁶ – a remark that was met with great relief, as it was obvious that the congregation did not know what remuneration I expected.

That night and the next long morning service were hard work. Like a young woman trying to impress her suitor on a first date, I was trying my best to read the old-fashioned English correctly and to pause long enough for the choir. I made the mistake that all young religious leaders do in their first sermons: we try to tell the congregation everything we know. It was tedious. It was spiritless. Simply put: I was trying too hard.

So I flew back home, embarrassed. I could feel that on that particular *Rosh Hashannah*, the congregation gained no spiritual experience. Had they not already bought me the ticket for the Day of Atonement ten days later, I would never have seen them again. My pride was shattered. I had tried so hard but hadn't gotten it, and in my heart I knew that I was going back on *Yom Kippur* only because the ticket had already been bought. The congregation would never invite me to return. But this realisation released me from the need to please them all the time, and gave me the freedom to do what I really wanted.

On *Yom Kippur*, I read more in my mother tongue. The Hebrew added a really traditional atmosphere. My sermons were not on what the congregants ought to do, but rather on what I had learned and loved during my years of Jewish studies. Then, when the most moving prayer of *Avinu Malkenu* arrived, I stopped the choir with its long-winded style. I opened the holy ark where the Torahs were kept, and I sang the prayer as my grandmother used to sing it for us. It was a traditional, heartrending Eastern European tune. One by

one the congregants rose to their feet and joined in, adding their voices in this wonderful melody. We all cried together and it felt as if the heavenly gates opened for our prayers. When I landed in Cape Town the next day I told my husband that I was a “newborn Jew”.

The congregants obviously felt the same, as ever since then I have been the proud spiritual leader of Temple Hillel, the progressive community in East London. In the past twenty-three years I have led the community in celebrations and in mourning. To date, I have buried some of the congregants who were present during my initial, embarrassing first visit; but we also have a whole generation who have never had another “rabbi”. For them to have a woman leading the congregation is the natural order of things. On the rare occasions when I could not hold a service, the South African United Progressive Judaism Centre sent them a male rabbi. They welcomed these rabbis as well, since after all, for Temple Hillel’s congregants gender in religious leadership has not been a contentious issue.

Alas, for traditional Jews the idea of a woman officiating has not been quite as easy to accept, and throughout my journey, people have kept reminding me that it is not the norm. My first such experience occurred some twenty years ago. I was invited to give a talk at a *Succoth* function to the seniors at the Marais Road Synagogue in Sea Point. The Orthodox rabbi of Marais Road was to have been present to welcome the multitude of seniors, but alas, he didn’t arrive. That afternoon a friend phoned to ask if I had given a talk that morning at the Orthodox synagogue. “Yes”, I confirmed. “Was the rabbi there?” asked my friend. “No”, I replied; “most probably something urgent came up, such as a funeral or visiting a very sick person.” At this point I was informed that the rabbi hadn’t come because of me. I didn’t believe it, so I phoned the rabbi directly and was shocked when he confirmed that he could not share a platform with me, for two reasons: people associated me with the Progressive Movement, and I was a woman. In this way I discovered that Orthodox rabbis do not share platforms with more progressive leaders as a matter of principle; and that as a rule, women are not supposed to address the community.

Having learned about the exclusion of women from the pulpit, I put it to the test. Once when I was a guest at a *bar mitzvah* in the Orthodox synagogue in my suburb, the rabbi invited the guests for tea in the community hall. After a short speech he said that he would not be in town the following week, and that one of the laymen in the congregation would lead the service. I went over to him and offered to help the lay preacher by doing the sermons, explaining that my Ph.D. dealt in detail with the chapters we were due to read from the Torah the following week. There was a pause, after which the rabbi said gingerly that it was not a good idea. I persisted, pointing out that while for

the lay preacher it might be hard work to find something worthwhile to say, the core of my thesis was pertinent and the congregation would appreciate it. After a further pause the rabbi proposed, as a concession, that I give the information to my husband “and he can tell the congregation”.

I smiled, since by that time I had gone far enough in my studies to know the principle that women should be kept at home. As the idiom quoted by many very conservative rabbis goes: *kol kvoda shel bat-melech p'nima* — “the honour of the princesses is within the palace walls”.⁷ This sentiment is also expressed in the more extreme notions that “a woman’s voice” and “a woman’s hair” are *erva*. *Erva* means “private” — on the same level as genitalia. Traditionally, this means that if Orthodox women are seen in public places, usually they should cover their hair and keep quiet.

Years later, during an interfaith dialogue on women’s place in various religious communities, my colleague, friend, and imam of the Claremont mosque, Dr. Rashid Omar, used the same idiom in Arabic to describe the prohibition on Muslim women from speaking in public. Hebrew and Arabic are sister languages, so this information prompted me to look for the origin of the close similarity of these rules.

It seems that the exclusion of women in both traditions was promoted and reinforced in North Africa at the time of the Jewish philosopher Maimonides (1136-1204), who updated the Jewish code of law. Maimonides was in close contact with the Muslim religious leaders and philosophers of his time. We cannot establish with certainty who influenced whom; yet sadly, both Jewish and Muslim women suffer from this ruling.

This issue surfaced in a more hurtful way when I was asked to give the main address on *Yom Hashoa* (Holocaust Day) in Johannesburg on the 8th of May, 2005. A week before *Yom Hashoa* I received a phone call from one of the organisers, asking me to withdraw. What transpired was that the United Orthodox rabbis did not think it appropriate that I speak. I was taken aback. I explained to the spokesman that as there had been wide publicity billing me as the main speaker, if I withdrew it might seem that I had let the community down on an important occasion. When he told me that he was under pressure from the rabbis, I tested how far they would go to bully women. I said that if they wrote me a letter stating that they were the ones asking me to withdraw, and give the reason in black and white, I would not come to Johannesburg. He took my request back to them. Half an hour later he phoned back and said that in that case, I might as well come as initially planned.

For me it was an important lesson: one of the tactics to keep women “in place” is to bully them, quietly. The minute the bullying is exposed, it is rare for bullies to admit to it, and they prefer to retreat quietly.

I experienced this discrimination at another very significant point in

my life. When my mother was very ill, and we knew that her days were numbered, I studied Jewish laws and customs pertaining to burial and mourning. As her body was lowered into the grave the rabbi called on my father to recite the *Kadish*, a prayer for the dead. My father replied that I, one of the daughters, wanted to recite it with him. The rabbi was quick to dismiss him, saying that it was incumbent only upon the male next-of-kin to recite the *Kadish*. My father stood his ground, saying that I had checked the law carefully and found nothing prohibiting women from reciting it. The rabbi moved away and let me come forward to say my last goodbye and have closure in a traditional way automatically afforded to men, and so easily taken away from women.

So are women not allowed to be rabbis and lead the congregation because they are not supposed to speak in public? Yes, but there is also another reason. Some suggest that this prohibition has to do with the menstrual cycle.

Before the invention of the microscope, people did not know that women are equal partners in the creation of life. The visible nature of men's ejaculation prompted ancient societies to conceptualise the act of fertilisation as an act of seeding — and, since before the microscope people had no knowledge of the ova women produce, they perceived women as mere receptacles. In the image of farming, women were seen as the “earth”. Thus, the Bible describes women's fertility as “fertile” or “arid”/“barren” soil. As women's cycle of ovum viability and disintegration that culminates in menstrual bleeding was unknown, the monthly bleeding was accepted as an unknown discharge, *nidah*. Women were therefore considered impure at that time of the month and were removed from contact with all men, even their husbands.

Many who try to excuse the prohibition of women from leadership roles — especially religious leadership, such as being a rabbi — explain that one cannot be a rabbi for half of the month, and keep away from public contact for the other two weeks because of being impure. In a heated debate with one of the proponents of this idea I asked, “If an older woman, after menopause, wanted to become an Orthodox rabbi, could *she* be ordained?” The answer was still a resounding *No*.

Having gone on to search for the real reason, I would like to suggest what I think is at the core of the prohibition. I would like to entitle my findings, *The road to hell is paved with good intentions*.

In ancient times, the survival of the clan was of utmost importance. Men, who are physically stronger, had to do the hunting; and women, who have wombs and breasts, carried the babies and breastfed them for as long as they could in order to secure their survival. The Jewish law, codified in stages — first in the Bible, then in the *Mishna* (200 CE) and the *Talmud* (500 CE) — recognised this important role, and gave women concessions regarding some

laws and in the performance of various rituals.

Rabbi Simlai was the first to enumerate the biblical commandments as 613 *mitzvot*.⁸ Since then many sages have tried to count and categorise all the commandments that appear in the Bible; but they have all agreed on the number 613. In the 12th century Maimonides elaborated on them and clearly divided the 613 commandments, distinguishing between what we are *prohibited* from doing — such as “Thou shalt not kill” or eating certain foods — and what we *should* do, such as “Honour your father and mother”, or building a *succah* and sitting in it during the Holiday of Tabernacles.

According to Maimonides there are 248 *mitzvot ase*, positive commandments directing us to perform acts, and 365 *mitzvot al ta'ase*, negative commandments directing us to abstain from certain acts. Following and adhering to negative commandments is required of all, in equal measure. Whether a man or a woman, one should not kill, steal, etc. Gender has no relevance. However, it is different when we are dealing with the positive commandments. Some of these specify the time they should be carried out, such as morning or evening prayer, or starting the building of the *succah* immediately once the Day of Atonement is over.

The sages suggested that women should not be obligated to fulfill these positive commandments. This decision was intended to be helpful towards women, recognising that their duties to their families, especially to their young children, superseded all other obligations. It seemed logical to the sages that if a baby needed to be fed, his or her mother should be excused from the morning prayer, for example. So Jewish women have been “released”; that is, they are not obligated to fulfill *mitzvot* that are time-bound. Thus, a hierarchy of obligated participations was established.

The problem is that when the sages established a hierarchy regulating who needs to fulfill which commandments, a parallel hierarchy of religious importance was established. The one who is obligated to do more and is expected to fulfill his obligations (i.e. the man) has come to be regarded as a more valuable member of the community than the one who is not obligated, and who has perhaps not participated in some religious activities (i.e., the woman). Consequently, according to the rabbis, when a man and a woman fulfill the same commandment, the man’s action is more acceptable to God.⁹

I contest this on the grounds that as women are obeying these commandments voluntarily, out of total commitment and love (maybe at great sacrifice), their actions should actually be seen as more valuable than men’s, since men are obligated and may even resent that fact. The rabbis put forward the opposite view: men’s actions are more valuable, because through their obligation and constant repetition, they are more proficient and better at fulfilling these *mitzvot*. My tongue-in-cheek response is that, as one would

expect, my opinion as a woman is less acceptable, while of course the male rabbi has the prerogative to pronounce on Jewish law.

What is the implication of this ruling? When we worship in community, some prayers are recited by each individual quietly, and others are recited aloud by one person on behalf of all those present. The person who recites the prayer aloud, from a spiritual point of view, has to be the most significant person in the community.¹⁰ Therefore rabbis have to be highly educated and of high standing in the community. This rule applies even on a small scale: if a family sits and eats together, for example, a young child is not allowed to say the benediction after the meal on behalf of his or her elders, as the latter are considered more important. No one of lower standing can fulfill a commandment on behalf of people of higher standing.

In the same way, if a woman is in a company of men, she cannot pray on their behalf, because as noted, women are considered less spiritually significant than are men.¹¹ Consequently, women can never lead Orthodox congregations. A law brought into being with good intentions, designed to be kind to women and to consider their role as caregivers, has in fact jeopardised their ability to lead a congregation of men. Thus, it is obvious why I am a spiritual leader of a progressive community, rather than of a more traditional Jewish community, who

- ban me from speaking from the pulpit;
- worry that I might be menstruating; and
- consider me a less spiritual person than the male congregants.

Those of us in the Progressive Movement may acknowledge Maimonides, Joseph Karo, Rabbi Jacob of Emden, and many other sages as great philosophers whose wisdom was unique in their time. But it does not stop us from overriding these sages' pronouncements by updating the rules and laws to address the reality of our own time.

Concluding Note

When I grew up as a secular Jew, I did not know much about my tradition. I was oblivious to the gaping hole in my spiritual existence. I didn't know of the magnificent achievements and spiritual beauty of my heritage — but I didn't know its hurtful attitude towards women, either. In the process of gaining knowledge, I became an activist and joined many Jewish women in the Progressive Movement, who see it as their (our) lifelong task to change the status of Jewish women — including those in the Orthodox stream.

Somehow as the years pass and the more traditional Orthodox women decline any help from people outside their close-knit community,¹² I have

learned to enjoy my tradition in more peaceful and spiritual ways. I see myself less as an activist, and more as a proud spiritual leader at Temple Hillel, one progressive community at the southern tip of Africa. I can feel my spirit soaring when I stand in front of our congregation and enjoy singing the most heartrending prayers, while the multitude of children in our ever-growing community surrounds me – some tugging at my gown, some hugging my legs, or just holding my hands while they join in with their little voices.

Notes

- 1 While I agree in principle with Maslow's notion that humans are motivated by needs that are set in a hierarchal way (see Maslow 1943: 370-396), I would like to suggest that under unusual circumstances the order of these needs is more fluid than in Maslow's schema. In South Africa, for example, during the struggle against apartheid the people's readiness to die for their ideals superseded their physical need for shelter.
- 2 The Jewish rites of passage marking the transition from childhood to adulthood. Traditionally, boys go through it when they are 13 years old, while girls, who mature earlier, when they are 12. In the Progressive Movement all children experience it after their 13th birthday.
- 3 See Reisenberger (1998: 50-51; 1999: 43-50; 2000a: 83-96; 2000b: 57-68; 2003: 109-118; and 2005: 75-87) and Reisenberger and Schrire (2001: 103-120).
- 4 See for example, "Yom Hashoah – 2000 gather in Johannesburg" (*SA Jewish Report*, 13.05.2005, p. 6); "Chief Rabbi's Action Questioned" (*SA Jewish Report*, 03.06.2005, p. 14); "Case of Kicking the Bucket" (*SA Jewish Report*, 10.06.2005, p. 14); "Be Open about Others' Views" (*SA Jewish Report*, 24.06.2005, p. 5); and "Good Start for a Debate" (*SA Jewish Report*, 12.08.2005, p. 11).
- 5 For more on the prevention of *aguna*, the "chained woman syndrome", see Reisenberger (1999: 43-50).
- 6 See commentaries to *Pirkei Avot* 4:5.
- 7 Psalm 45:14.
- 8 *Talmud Bavli, Makkot*, 23b.
- 9 See Rabbi Jacob of Emden (sometimes known as Yavetz) (1698-1776), *Mor Uktzia*, on *Orach Haim*, *Siman* 55. Commentary on Joseph Karo, (1488-1575), *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Haim*.
- 10 *Talmud Yerushalmi, Succah*, chapter 3 *Hallacha* 9.
- 11 See full discussion in Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Blessings, chapter 5 (laws 16-17).
- 12 See Tamar Ross (2004: 30).

Works Cited

- Maslow, Abraham, H. 1943. "A Theory of Human Motivation." *Psychological Review*, 50, 4, pp. 370-396.
- Reisenberger, Azila, T. 1998. "The Status of Jewish Women, a Brief Polemic." *Jewish Affairs*, 53, 4, pp. 50-51.
- _____. 1999. "Status of Jewish Women in South Africa — With Special Reference to Apartheid and Post-Apartheid Eras." In *Religion and Politics in South Africa*, edited by Wolfram Weisse and Abdulkader Tayob, 43-50. New York: Waxmann.
- _____. 2000a. "I am South African, Jewish, Woman." In *Claiming our Footprints: South African Women Reflect on Context, Identity and Spirituality*, edited by D. Ackermann, E. Getman, H. Kotze, and J. Tobler, 83-96. SA: EFSA Institute for Theological and Interdisciplinary Research.
- _____. 2000b. "Biblical Women: Non-Existent Entity." *Journal for Constructive Theology*, 6, 2, pp. 57-68.
- _____. 2003. "Jewish Women in South Africa." In *Umbrüche — Bewältigung — Geschlecht. Genderstudien zu afrikanischen Gesellschaften in Afrika und Deutschland*, edited by V. Böll, U. Günther, B. Hemshorn de Sánchez, H. Niedrig, and J. Schroeder, 109-118. New York/Munich/Berlin: Waxmann Münster.
- _____. 2005. "The Development of *Halachah* and Jewish Women." *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 18, 2, pp. 75-87.
- _____, and G. Schrire, 2001. "Balancing Tradition and Transition: South African Jewish Women's Search for Affiliation." *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 14, 2, pp. 103-120.
- Ross, Tamar. 2004. *Expending the Palace of Torah, Orthodoxy and Feminism*. Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press.