

## *Women's Leadership in Judaism: Amy Eilberg's Ordination*

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**Abstract:** Conservative Judaism is a sect of American Judaism founded in the late 1800s by immigrants and has been the backbone of American Judaism for over a hundred years. Yet in the 1970s as America and less religious sects of Judaism moved forward in gender equality, Conservative Judaism resisted in order to maintain its customs, such as the traditional roles that women held in Judaism as being solely mothers, wives, and daughters. This case outlines Conservative Judaism's journey to allowing women's ordination as rabbis. The case delves into the historical significance of women in Judaism by looking at different practices in which women have been involved. Women in Judaism are both considered holier and lesser-than men, a contradiction which has carried over from biblical times into modern practices. This case analyzes the issue of women's ordinance in the 1970s and 80s in America. It specifically discusses Amy Eilberg, the first Conservative Jewish woman ordained as a rabbi, and her journey to the rabbinate. The case additionally explores the decision-making body of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) and its significance for Conservative and American Judaism. While the Conservative movement decided to allow women into the rabbinate, there are still gender gaps in wages, significance, and legitimacy for female rabbis in the Jewish community. Ultimately, this is a case that reaches further than the American Jewish community and has implications for the relationship between religious conservatism and gender equality.

### **Literal vs. Metaphorical Survival**

In 1972, Sally Jane Preisand was ordained as the first female Reform rabbi (Nadell 1999). Jews from less religious sects, such as Reform and Reconstructionist movements, welcomed the change. Jews from more religious sects, such as Orthodox Judaism, feared it. And Conservative Judaism— American Judaism's middle ground— was stuck in the middle (Nadell 1999).

One hundred years after Conservative Judaism's founding in 1886, the mounting pressure on the movement to include female rabbis weighed heavily on its agenda as Conservative Judaism attempted to navigate second wave feminism. As a movement with Conservative in its name, it was difficult to make changes to the status quo. Conservative Judaism watched, holding its breath as Jewish women across the country began to explore what female leadership meant within American Jewry. One such woman was Amy Eilberg, the first woman to actively pursue ordination.

An ongoing dilemma of American Conservative Judaism, and a struggle also experienced in the United States more generally, is: do women deserve to be leaders? The Pew Research Center found in a 2016 study that "most Americans find women indistinguishable from men on key leadership traits" (Pew Research Center 2016, 4). While many Conservative and Reform

women are rabbis today, for a majority of Judaism's history, women were primarily considered in terms of their relationships as wives, mothers, and side characters in men's stories. All this considered, women were and are extremely vital to Judaism, and the female biblical leaders that exemplified this are respected and honored (The Role of Women 2017). Regardless, the roles forced upon women from the founding of Judaism have contributed to their ongoing oppression within religious Jewish communities.

The idea of survival and finding the means to survive are critical to the Jewish people because of how dispersed and relatively small the religion is— Jews make up 0.2% of the world's population, and around 2% of the United States population (Maltz 2018). These numbers are daunting to many religious Jews who see these small numbers and fear the destruction of Jewry as the world knows it. Many Jews, religious and secular alike, encourage every Jew to procreate, specifically with other Jews. However, in the case of the Jewish people, survival is both literal and metaphorical. Less than a century ago, 6 million Jews were systematically murdered in the Holocaust; in 1492, all Jews and Muslims were expelled from Spain; and in Israel in early 1st century BCE, Jewish people were forced to disperse across the world (Simple to Remember n.d.). In order to survive literally, Jewish people living in these areas were forced to assimilate and convert, hide their identities, or escape. Many Jewish people chose to publicly maintain their Jewish identities and perish rather than deny their Judaism and attempt to escape with their lives.

Jews are not being systematically expelled, murdered, or targeted at the same magnitude they once were. And yet, Jews still prioritize survival. The dilemma remains: does survival mean physical survival, or does survival mean conservation of traditions and values? And what is the worse price to pay: that of assimilation, or that of losing people from the religion? In terms of women in the rabbinate, the Conservative movement had to make a choice: ordain women to the rabbinate and go against 3,000 years of traditions, or not ordain women and face the consequences of losing many American Jews who feel passionately that it is time for women's equality.

### **Women in Judaism**

While Jewish inclusion of women in leadership is a new conversation for many, women have always been imperative to both religious and cultural aspects of Judaism. This role did not necessarily include leadership or rabbinate, but highlighted the importance of the *Eshet Chayil*, or woman of valor. Every Friday night, at the start of Shabbat, Jewish homes around the world sing *Eshet Chayil*: "A woman of valor, who can find? Her worth is far beyond that of rubies. Her husband's heart trusts in her, and lacks no treasures. She is good to him, never bad, all the days of her life" (Chabad n.d., n.p.). These words are meant to honor and show gratitude for the matriarch of a household, but they also reemphasize the importance of a woman's relation to her husband.

In Judaism, there are seven matriarchs and patriarchs who are honored and recognized: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob; Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. The patriarchs are recognized for their contributions to the founding of the Jewish people and are mentioned in the most important prayer, the *Amidah*: "God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob, the great, mighty and awesome God... who creates all things, who remembers the piety of the Patriarchs" (Kaunfer 1995, 94-95). The matriarchs, while admired and crucial to the *Torah* (the holy book), are not mentioned with the same importance as the patriarchs. The patriarchs are a direct lineage: Abraham was the father of Isaac who was the father of Jacob, while the matriarchs are the

women who married into this family and created the next generations and are valued for their procreation of the Jewish people (Lieber and Harlow 2001).

There are also several other women who are important in Judaism: the prophetess Miriam, Moses' sister; Esther, the Queen of Persia; Deborah, a Judge; and Ruth, great grandmother of King David (Lieber and Harlow 2001). These women are spoken about as heroes in Hebrew School classes across the country and are considered central to the Jewish people's story. Miriam kept Moses alive as a baby, and he went on to free the Hebrew slaves in Egypt; Esther saved the Jewish people of Persia; Deborah was a defining factor in the Israelites conquering Canaan, Ancient Israel; and Ruth is a convert who ultimately became the great grandmother of King David (Lieber and Harlow 2001).

The most pertinent example of women's role in Judaism, past and present, is Hannah, a prophetess from 11th century BCE. She was one of two wives of a man, Elkanah, whose genealogy and background are extensively described. While Hannah was the "primary" wife, the other wife, Peninnah, was able to bear children to Elkanah. She was valued because of her ability to bear sons for Elkanah, and in larger terms, the Jewish people (Klein 2009). Hannah is presented as a woman whose only purpose and sense of self comes from her infertility, as she begs to God to let her bear a son (Klein 2009). She finally was given the gift of motherhood, and gave birth to Samuel, a future prophet, judge, and king-maker. She is thus known as Hannah, mother of Samuel, wife of Elkanah (Klein 2009). This story is one of many that restates the importance of a Jewish woman's role as mother, wife, and homemaker.

Passages from the *Torah* have guided Jewish life since it was written. The passages about women have shaped women's roles as mothers and wives. Also important to women's role in Judaism is the idea that they are not obligated by traditional Judaism to participate in all of the commandments that men do (Orenstein 2008). Traditionally, men wear leather straps called *Tefillin* and a prayer shawl called a *Tallit* during daily prayers. Women are taught that they do not need *Tefillin* or a *Tallit*, because they are not commanded to, thus they cannot say the prayers that command them to do so (Orenstein 2008). Contemporary Judaism has internalized these stories and implemented these lessons into traditional synagogue roles:

Because women are not obligated to perform certain commandments, their observance of those commandments does not "count" for group purposes. While a woman must pray the silent standing prayer just as a man does, she need not pray the full prayer service of the synagogue that a man prays. Thus, a woman's voluntary attendance at daily worship services does not count toward a minyan (the 10 people necessary to recite certain prayers), a woman's voluntary recitation of certain prayers does not count on behalf of the group (thus women cannot lead services), and a woman's voluntary reading from the *Torah* does not count towards the community's obligation to read from the *Torah* (The Role of Women 2017, n.p.).

Essentially, women's observance of commandments does not count toward fulfilling group commandments. These rules further invalidate women's leadership in synagogues and as Jews. Additionally, there is a prayer uttered daily by many religious men that thanks God for "not making me a woman" (The Role of Women 2017, n.p.). This prayer, called the *Birkot HaShachar*, is an important prayer sung by most religious Jews in the morning (Harlow 1985). The *Birkot HaShachar* allows Jews to begin their day by thanking God for freedom, the ability to see, strength, and most controversially, for not making them women. While this specific verse

has been taken out of many egalitarian prayer books, there is a rich history of Judaism's oppression of women hidden in the pages of everyday prayer books (Harlow 1985).

In more religious sects of Judaism, namely Orthodox, there is what is known as a *mechitzah* between men and women during prayers. The *mechitzah* blocks men and women from each other's view. Also, in Orthodox sects, women are not allowed to read *Torah* for their Bat Mitzvahs like their male counterparts (Joseph 2003).

Ultimately, women's leadership within Jewish communities has been consistently ignored, yet women's importance has always been central to Judaism's mission. While women in Judaism have been primarily considered homemakers, they are also considered holier than men. Jewish women have walked on a tightrope since the beginning of Judaism: women have never had the same rights as men, but they are also honored more than men in many ways. Women's roles in Judaism are not only clearly defined but also self-contradictory.

### **Conservative Judaism**

In the late 19th century, an influx of Eastern European Ashkenazi Jews began arriving in the United States to escape religious persecution. These immigrants brought 2,000-year-old traditions with them, as well as a need for survival and assimilation (Library of Congress n.d.). These conflicting priorities— conservation versus adaptation— led directly to contemporary American Judaism. While many Jews chose to either disassociate from their traditions and background in the hope of becoming “true” Americans or to isolate themselves from America to maintain their traditions, a growing number of Jews found themselves somewhere in between. These Jews did not necessarily want to get rid of their pasts, but also wanted to adapt to American ideals. Thus, the Conservative movement was born.<sup>1</sup>

Conservative Judaism has always been a complicated sect as it was founded on both the principles of conservation and adaptability. Its formation rose from disagreement, as most change does: the founders of Conservative Judaism, Zacharia Frankel and Solomon Schechter, were a part of a larger group of Jews who wished to adapt to American life while still conserving Jewish law, *halakhah* (BBC Religions 2009). This was during the German Reform movement, a time when Jews fleeing Europe chose to additionally flee the traditional Judaism of their ancestors and ultimately either joined the American Reform movement or deserted the religion completely. Those who disagreed and wanted to conserve *halakhah* unknowingly began the Conservative movement known today.

Interestingly, America's Conservative movement is the most successful of its kind. In the United Kingdom, France and Israel, Masorti is the equivalent. In Latin America, there is small but growing population of Conservative Jews. However, Israel has a sharply divided Jewish population with a large majority of people identifying as either secular or Ultra-orthodox. The Masorti movement has very little cultural, religious, or political significance relative to the Orthodox and secular communities because of its smaller population (Bard n.d.).

Shortly after Conservative Judaism's founding, the Jewish Theological Seminary, or JTS—arguably the most important institution to Conservative Jewry—was founded in New York City in 1886 (Jewish Theological Seminary n.d.). While there are other places that train Conservative Jews for the rabbinate, Jewish Theological Seminary is the primary producer of

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that Conservative Judaism, with a capital C, is a sect of Judaism that has nothing to do with political or social conservatism. The name stems from a desire to “conserve” Judaism while also understanding a dire need to assimilate (Jewish Virtual Library n.d.).

Conservative rabbis and the Seminary continues to operate as a major center for Conservative Judaism.

Almost exactly a century after the founding of Conservative Judaism, pressure arose for Judaism to include women. This pressure mainly stemmed from second wave feminism. The demographics of the second wave feminist movement are very similar to those of American Jewish women: largely white<sup>2</sup> and upper-middle class (Rosenbaum n.d.). The second wave of feminism was real and threatening to Judaism, a religion that has historically valued male leadership as the only form of valid leadership.

### **Conservative Judaism and the Emergence of Feminist Judaism: 1970-1983**

Conservative Judaism reached its height of 832 member congregations in 1970, but this number dwindled as “the end of the postwar ‘baby boom’ and the decay of urban and inner suburban neighborhoods hurt synagogue membership [and] the number of United Synagogue member congregations dropped from its peak... in 1971” (Bard 2005, n.p.).

In 1971, a small group of Jewish feminists formed Ezrat Nashim. Their first order of business was to petition Conservative synagogues to include women in *minyans*, the prayer center of Jewish life that occurs daily in religious communities. Ezrat Nashim pushed ultimately for inclusion of women not only in minyans, but also as legitimate members of congregations and the larger Conservative Jewish community. They gave a speech titled “Jewish Women’s Call for Change” on the floor of the Rabbinical Assembly in March of 1972 (Hyman 1995, n.p.). In this manifesto, the women of Ezrat Nashim criticized Judaism for its traditions regarding women and its failure to develop into a progressive, women-inclusive religion. They continued, citing the fact that women were not permitted to have an active role in synagogue, and women’s family-oriented roles in Judaism: home-maker, daughter, mother, wife. Ezrat Nashim ended their speech with a call to action including that:

Women be granted membership in synagogues, Women be counted in the minyan, Women be allowed full participation in religious observances... Women be recognized as witnesses before Jewish law, Women be allowed to initiate divorce, Women be permitted and encouraged to attend Rabbinical and Cantorial schools, and to perform Rabbinical and Cantorial functions in synagogues Women be encouraged... to assume professional leadership roles, in synagogues and in the... Jewish community, Women be considered as bound to fulfill all mitzvot equally with men (Hyman 1972, n.p.).

Ezrat Nashim drastically shaped how larger institutions within the Jewish community reacted to the larger women’s movement. In 1974, the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards voted in a near-tie to allow women to participate in *minyans*. This was the first move made by JTS toward gender equality (Hyman 1995).

Of the organizations central to Jewish women’s journey to ordination, the most significant was Ezrat Nashim. While there was never a singular comprehensive Jewish women’s organization, Ezrat Nashim was the first organization to put forth a feminist Jewish agenda

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<sup>2</sup> To define Judaism as an ethnicity would be exclusionary of the hundreds of thousands of Jews of color from Ethiopia, Persia, and converts or biracial children of Jewish parents. This is a common debate within the Jewish community as there is generally more acknowledgement of Ashkenazi Jews (who often live in America with white privilege). Many Jews never experience any form of oppression for their identity because they don’t wear their identity on their skin; however, it is incorrect to say that Jews are considered “white” by anti-Semites throughout America; “white” meaning assimilated and acceptable to nationalists. Historically, Jews were not classified as a race: just as an “other” (Rosenbaum n.d.).

through discussions with rabbis, their wives, and others within the Conservative Jewish community (Nadell 2003). Ezrat Nashim called upon the Conservative movement to take steps to recognize women as leaders, and this was well received by many individuals within the Jewish community (Nadell 2003). Jewish feminism became a cause that many Jewish women put themselves behind: in 1973 and 1974, the North American Jewish Students' Network put together two conferences, at which hundreds of young Jewish women and men showed up and listened to prominent speakers such as Congressman Bella Abzug. From these conferences, the Jewish Feminist Organization was born (Nadell 2003). While this organization was short-lived as the movement was incohesive, the conferences, Ezrat Nashim, and the Jewish Feminist Organization made an impact that reflected the Jewish people's ability to change and adapt (Nadell 2003).

### **The Opposition to Gender Equity in Conservative Judaism**

Judaism is a religion of continuity that prioritizes tradition. At the same time, Judaism's desperate need for survival, particularly because it is not a missionary religion, has led to a focus on adaptation and change within a religion based on tradition. When Judaism no longer had a home in Eastern Europe, rather than assimilating, many Jews left in the hope of finding a more accepting home in America (Brustein 2004). Many of those who stayed and did not assimilate perished in the Holocaust.

The Jewish people have faced persecution and expulsion from the beginning of civilization. Jews were expelled from Israel by the Romans, thus beginning the Jewish diaspora. Jews spread across the world, to everywhere from Ethiopia to Spain to Iran (Simple to Remember n.d.). Still, after 2,000 years of diaspora, the Jewish people exist. Some credit the continuity of the spirit of the Jewish people to the prioritization of tradition and maintenance of the norms that began before the diaspora. Within Jewish communities, it can be frightening to change anything in fear of damaging the religion's core values that have helped it survive thus far. In the case of the Holocaust, many Jews felt that assimilation was the death of the Jewish people, thus some made the decision that they would rather die a Jew than survive without their Judaism. While the stakes were considerably lower in the United States, the idea that assimilation is a fate worse than death remains a core belief of many Jews:

'Assimilation in the shocking numbers that we see is worse [than] the physical Holocaust that we saw,' said [Rabbi Shimon] Elitov [a member of Israel's Chief Rabbinate Council High]. Other senior rabbis also invoked the Holocaust, with Rabbi Barel Lazar, Chief Rabbi of Russia, saying, 'In the Holocaust they killed us... through murder... Today they try to murder our souls' (Oryszczuk 2014, n.p.).

The line that many Conservative Jews have been forced to draw time and time again as an "in-between" is complex because of the constantly contradicting values of conservation and survival. In order for Judaism to survive and thrive in America, there remains a need to assimilate to American standards as a Christian-centric nation. Currently, at 2% of the population of the United States, Jews face 58% of the hate crimes committed in the US. It is safer for a Jew to assimilate as these hate crimes only increase as the years pass, most recently by 37% in 2018 (Jewish Telegraphic Agency 2018). At the same time, the more Judaism adapts to changing climates in the United States, the less definitive Judaism is as a religion. These are the questions many Conservative Jews ask themselves: The precedent of female difference and separation has

been set, and enforced, for the hundreds of years Judaism has existed. How would allowing women to become rabbis in synagogues, on rabbinical boards, and leaders in the community potentially lead to other drastic changes, such as intermarriage? And ultimately, at what point is American Judaism not really Judaism at all, just a shell of what it once was?

There is a fear that Judaism is a dying religion. As Jews assimilate more into American society, an undying anxiety is mounting within the Jewish people that without constant procreation, the Jewish religion and people will die. Many Jews blame this on intermarriage, the hot topic in Conservative temples as of late. The fear is that if more Jews marry Non-Jews, the birthrate (thus, the growth) of the Jewish population will drop— and this fear is confirmed:

As the result of skyrocketing rates of intermarriage and assimilation, as well as "the lowest birth rate of any religious or ethnic community in the United States," (Rosenman 1984) the era of enormous Jewish influence on American life may soon be coming to an end... our numbers may soon be reduced... One Harvard study predicts that if current demographic trends continue, the American Jewish community is likely to number less than 1 million. Other projections suggest that early in the next century, American Jewish life as we know it will be a shadow of its current, vibrant self— consisting primarily of isolated pockets of ultra-Orthodox Hasidim (Dershowitz 1998, 1).

This fear has fed the opposition to gender equality both directly and indirectly. As modern Judaism drifts further away from the Judaism of previous generations, there lingers a sense of desperation to grasp onto stability and veer away from the unknown. While more lenient sects of Judaism such as Reform and Reconstructionist decided to ordain women in the 1970s, the Conservative Jewish community had more to think about, being more traditional. Conservative Judaism wanted to stay true to its original values and ideals, while also adapting to norms. The issue of women's leadership was at the forefront of Conservative Judaism's mind when Amy Eilberg began training.

### **Amy Eilberg**

Amy Eilberg was born in Philadelphia. Her mother was a social worker, and her father was a United States House Representative. "Eilberg grew up surrounded by a passion for civic engagement. In her family, that value intersected with a deeply-held Jewish commitment to community service" (Bring 2009, n.p.). While her family was not particularly religious, Eilberg convinced her family to observe the Jewish diet laws, *Kashrut*. She knew she wanted to pursue a more religious lifestyle and sought out programs and organizations that would support this.

In high school, she became involved in several Conservative Jewish institutions. United Synagogue Youth, USY, is the teen version of United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the largest organization in North American Conservative Judaism. Ramah is a network of summer camps that was founded right after World War II. It spans the entire country and is known for its connection to the Conservative movement. The mission is "to create and sustain excellent summer camps... that inspire commitment to Jewish life and develop the next generation of Jewish leaders" (National Ramah Commission n.d., n.p.). Amy was a counselor at several Ramah camps in her late teens and early twenties.

These organizations inspired Eilberg to pursue Judaism further. In 1972, Amy enrolled as an undergraduate at the historically Jewish college, Brandeis University, and majored in Jewish studies. She also became involved with Judaism on campus: reading *Torah*, exploring Jewish

communities, and participating in Hillel. In 1976, Eilberg graduated from Brandeis and enrolled in Jewish Theological Seminary to study *Talmud*, the compiled ancient holy books that include the *Torah*. She graduated with a master's degree in *Talmud*, and continued on to teach at Midreshet Yerushalayim, a training school in Israel that is run by Jewish Theological Seminary (Berman 2018).<sup>3</sup>

### **The Journey to Ordination**

The Rabbinical Assembly is the international association of Conservative and Masorti rabbis and was originally the Alumni Association of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Its ties to the Jewish Theological Seminary run deep, meaning when JTS speaks, the Rabbinical Assembly listens. In 1977, the Rabbinical Assembly was extremely close to approving women's ordination when JTS's new chancellor and Rabbinical Assembly member, Rabbi Gerson Cohen, urged his Rabbinical Assembly colleagues to pause their efforts and let a commission do a comprehensive *halakhic* study on women's ordination (Sedan 1980). This plan involved waiting two years, then announcing the findings at the 1979 Rabbinical Assembly's convention. In 1979, at the Rabbinical Assembly convention, eleven out of fourteen on the commission found no *halakhic* issues, and Rabbi Cohen recommended that the assembly pass the ordination of women. However, JTS's faculty tabled the issue of women's ordination after a series of delays that complicated the process (Sedan 1980).

When Eilberg learned that Jewish Theological Seminary had tabled the issue of women's ordination in 1979, she "thought, they won't make me a rabbi with a capital R, so I'll put the training together myself, to approximate rabbinic training," (Bring 2009, n.p.). Eilberg continued to educate herself on rabbinical studies while JTS maintained its stance against women's ordination and earned rabbinical credits while not enrolled as a rabbinical student. She continued to take classes and educate herself so that if the time came, she would be able to quickly become an ordained rabbi. Eilberg prepared herself for the day that she hoped would eventually come and waited alongside other Conservative Jewish women for the issue of women's ordination to gain momentum so that they, too, could be leaders in the Jewish community.

### **Epilogue**

The Jewish Theological Seminary Faculty Senate made the final decision after a decade of debate on October 24<sup>th</sup>, 1983. The vote was ultimately 34 to 8, in favor of women's ordination (Austin 1983). The Chancellor, Rabbi Gerson Cohen, was the big factor in swaying the JTS senate to approve the measure. The move to vote on the issue came after the leading opposition to the cause, Saul Lieberman, died. Lieberman was a leading scholar and teacher at JTS who, in his later years, was very upset about the concept of women's ordination due to his commitment to *halakhah* and traditional Judaism.

While a majority of the Conservative movement and the JTS senate approved of the measure, several key faculty members defected. Because of the split in the senate, "some Conservative rabbis set up the Union for Traditional Conservative Judaism in 1979 which later split from the movement as the Union for Traditional Judaism (UTJ). It now has its own rabbinical association, law committee, and rabbinical school" (Bard n.d., n.p.). UTJ maintains more traditional laws, such as separate seating for men and women. While this sect of Judaism is

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<sup>3</sup> While women were not permitted to be ordained, they were allowed to enroll at Jewish Theological Seminary to earn other degrees (Berman 2018).

not well known, Conservative Judaism did isolate some members of its movement in the journey to women's ordination.

Amy Eilberg was the first woman ordained. She was one of several women who enrolled in rabbinical school, but because she studied for many years prior to the vote, she had enough credits on her transcript to be ordained before her peers (Berman 2018). In 1985, Amy Eilberg became the first Conservative female rabbi, and she certainly was not the last.

Eilberg's ordination has opened the door for many religious women to find spaces as leaders in their communities. While this has been significant in terms of progress and representation of female leadership, challenges and opposition have continued into the present. According to Pamela Nadell's article in the Jewish Women's Archives, "the rabbis that for years had routinely admitted to its ranks rabbis trained at seminaries, turned away qualified female applicants" (2009, n.p.). Additionally, a 2004 study sponsored by the Rabbinical Assembly came to the conclusion that men lead larger congregations than women and are paid significantly more than their female counterparts (Cohen and Schor 2004).

The Conservative Jewish community has been rapidly losing members since women's inclusion in the rabbinate, though this correlation does not imply causation. More and more people are moving to less religious communities and congregations, disaffiliating, or intermarrying. Among the oldest generation of U.S. Jewish adults, 93% identify as Jews by religion, whereas "among Jews in the youngest generation of U.S. adults – the Millennials – 68% identify as Jews by religion" (Liu 2017, n.p.). Who is to say if this 25% decrease of religious affiliation is a product of the continuous change in Conservative Judaism? Ultimately the rapid change that has occurred within Conservative Judaism has consequences. Change over 50 years may not seem radical, but in a religion that has existed for over 3,000 years, 50 years is the blink of an eye. Studies have shown that secularity is the general trend for religiosity in a majority of western countries throughout most religious denominations (Lozano 2017). In terms of the Conservative movement and those opposed to change within it, this is the worst-case scenario—losing members. Additionally, because the Jewish population is so small within both the world and the US, the losses are that much more significant.

The move to ordain women and accept female leaders was one that many Conservative Jews supported, but to other Conservative Jews, it was a move backward in the mission of conserving the Judaism passed down by their grandparents. The Judaism they were given did not include women (Bard 2005). And while America itself was pushing and pulling for women to have equal rights, many Jews still consider themselves Jews before they consider themselves Americans. This argument may appear outdated now that there are many female Jewish leaders who have proved the opposition wrong by maintaining Conservative Judaism's core values. Nevertheless, despite this increase in female leaders, there remains a lesson to learn from this debate.

The pendulum of Conservative Judaism and its priorities frequently swings toward inclusivity, but one must wonder if this is the Judaism our ancestors imagined when they crossed the Atlantic Ocean in search of a free Judaism. Millions of people have given their lives because they were Jewish, from the Spanish Inquisition to the Holocaust. Is this how they imagined their offspring would end up? Assimilated? And to what extent is it necessary to assimilate to ensure the survival of the Jewish people? Nobody will ever have the answers, as there is no right or wrong answer to these questions. Against all odds, Judaism is a religion that has endured thousands of years and does so by constantly evolving while maintaining its traditions;

meanwhile, women like Amy Eilberg have forged paths to leadership in Judaism for hundreds of thousands of women, reaching far beyond just Conservative Judaism.

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