

Sally Priesand: The First American Female Rabbi

Framing this unit

Today in America, there are hundreds of female rabbis in the Reform movement. But, just over fifty years ago, there were none! The first woman - Sally Preisand - was ordained at the Hebrew Union College (HUC) in 1972. Learn about this pioneer female leader who became an inspiration for generations to come. This editorial will highlight for you how women's roles in Judaism has changed over the years.

Sally Priesand was the first woman to be ordained as a rabbi in America. On June 3, 1972, Priesand - who grew up in the Reform movement - graduated from the Hebrew Union College (HUC) in Cincinnati, Ohio and was ordained by HUC president, Alfred Gottschalk. She was an assistant and associate Rabbi at the prestigious Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York City.

This editorial about Rabbi Priesand's ordination was written by Jacob Rader Marcus and published in *The Sentinel*, the Chicago Jewish newspaper. Marcus also refers to Regina Jonas who completed rabbinical studies in Germany in the 1930s, and was privately ordained by Rev. Dr. Max Dieneman, when the official licensing authorities refused to ordain her. Regina Jonas was later deported to the Theresienstadt camp and murdered in Auschwitz in 1944. The article mentions that Sally Priesand, "Rabbi Sally" is "attractive, but at this juncture, she seems not to be interested in marriage." The writer goes on to wonder what the partner of a female rabbi might be called, with one suggestion being "the rabbit"! He also provides a short history of other religions in America who have ordained women. After discussing the female rabbinate in a lighthearted manner, using gender stereotypes that would not be deemed appropriate today, Marcus states his confidence that she will be a good rabbi: "she is competent and unpretentious, a good speaker and a fine human being." He ends his article by saying that: "it is sad to think that American Jewry has had to wait so long" and agreeing with Galileo that "the earth does move but -- sometimes it moves very, very slowly."

Group Activity

Each small group will prepare a digital timeline of the development of women's ordination, including women who were "firsts" in the various denominations.

Discussion

- What parts of this article are surprising to you?
- What challenges do you imagine Rabbi Priesand faced?
- What are your opinions about rabbinic ordination for women?
- What other women pioneers do you know in other fields?
- In what ways has the Jewish community's attitude towards women changed?

- Are attitudes toward women rabbis different in Israel than in the Diaspora?

Creative Activity

Interview a female Rabbi about their experience in training to become and practicing as a Rabbi.

Edit this article as if it were being written today.

Primary sources in this lesson

[Ordain First Woman Rabbi at Hebrew Union College, 1972](#)