

Women Rabbis: Exploration & Celebration



Papers Delivered at an
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Twenty Years of
Women in the Rabbinate


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From Antoinette Brown Blackwell
to Sally Priesand:
An Historical Perspective on the Emergence of
Women in the American Rabbinate

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In planning to speak at this conference, the question naturally arose as to how Ellen Umansky and I should divide the subject of the historical background to the emergence of women in the American rabbinate. Ellen and I spoke, and we decided on what seemed like a fair 50-50 division: she took on the Jewish aspects of the story, and I agreed to cover everything else.

My story begins early in the nineteenth century during the period known to American religious historians as the Second Great Awakening. In some respects, this was an era similar to our own: a time of remarkable religious change, with thousands of individuals undergoing religious revival (today we would say that they were "born again"), and a time when American religion itself was being transformed with the growth of new religious movements (some of which started as obscure sects and cults) and the acceptance of a host of new ideas. The most important of these ideas, for our purposes, was a diminished belief in predestination and innate human depravity and a greater emphasis on the ability of human beings, through their own efforts, to change and improve the world.

The transforming effects of the Second Great Awakening had a particular impact on women. Already in colonial times, American women had been deeply involved in religious life as church members, but now for the first time they found themselves enabled, even encouraged, to move beyond passive membership to take an active role in the great task of improving the world so as to speed the onset of the millennium. As historically powerless groups usually do when offered a new opportunity, they seized it and ran with it. "Women's prayer groups, charitable institutions, missionary and education societies, Sabbath School organizations and moral reform and maternal associations all multiplied phenomenally after 1800," a phenomenon that historian Nancy F. Cott has amply documented.¹ Through these organizations, often for the first time in their lives, women spoke out publicly and came to exercise spiritual and political leadership beyond the confines of their homes. These organizations served as a kind of lay ministry for some women, and they paved the way for more.

Let me point out in passing that a number of American Jewish women were influenced by some of these same currents. In concert with her Christian colleagues, for example, Rebecca Gratz of Philadelphia in 1801 helped to organize the Female Association for the Relief of Women and Children in Reduced Circumstances as well as fuel and sewing societies. She later worked to establish similar organizations for Jewish women: the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society and most important of all, the Hebrew Sunday School Society, which offered middle and upper class Jewish women some of the same kinds of opportunities for spiritual service—what we might today call religious action—as their Protestant sisters enjoyed. In a similar vein, the liturgical creativity of Penina Moïse in pre-Civil War Charleston reflects the religious awakening of women in this era. Prior to the nineteenth century we know of very few hymns by women, Christian or Jewish; beginning in this period we find them in growing numbers.²

"As opportunities for women in lay ministries proliferated," Ruth A. Tucker and Walter Liefeld write in their book, *Daughters of the Church*, "the door slowly opened for women to become involved in professional ministry. At first the only 'approved' ministries were ones that were strictly in the women's sphere—such activities as social work and writing—but even-

ually more and more women ventured into the male domain of evangelism and preaching."³

The word "eventually," even in this American Protestant context, carries a wide range of meanings. We know that among Baptists and Methodists, especially on the frontier, a few exceptional women—usually, by the way, single women—"heard the call" and took up preaching, albeit without the benefit of ordination and without having their own parish. It is said of one Mary Savage, who preached in New England as early as 1791, that "the smelting power of her exhortations was often irresistible." Clarissa Danforth, in the second decade of the nineteenth century, was described (with considerable exaggeration) as "the sensation preacher of the decade."⁴ None of these women, however, occupied mainline churches. Indeed, in Protestantism as also in Judaism, women enjoyed far greater opportunities outside of the mainstream (whether they were geographically remote or religiously remote) than they did at the center.

This point brings me to a remarkable person who is rarely discussed when we consider the roots of women in the American rabbinate and upon whom I therefore want to focus. She is the "Sally Priesand" of American Protestantism, the first woman of any denomination to be ordained in America: the Reverend Antoinette Louisa Brown (later Brown Blackwell).

She was born in 1825 in what was then a great center of American religious ferment, western New York, in the village of Henrietta. Like so many others at that time, her father was deeply affected by the revivalistic preaching of Charles Grandison Finney, and he returned to religion, bringing his whole family with him. Religion and education played an important role in Antoinette Brown's upbringing. Because she was bright and apparently had no aptitude whatsoever for domestic chores, which she hated, she was permitted to attend a secondary school, the only one in the county and therefore open to men and women alike. She graduated in 1840 at the age of fifteen and was immediately invited to assume a job as a teacher of young children.

"At some point during her teens," her biographer Elizabeth Cazden reports, "Antoinette formulated the ambition that would thrust her into historical prominence: She wanted to become a minister. It was not un-

usual for young women to show a strong interest in religious work during the 1840s. The world around them was changing rapidly...Many people felt confused about what part they should play in the new order. This identity crisis particularly affected young single women, and frequently made them open to greater involvement in religious activities. Despite other changes in their lives, they could still play an important part in society through the church and the various social reform organizations. In fact, both women and the church would increasingly be called upon to preserve and represent values of cooperation, sharing and nurturing that were cast aside by the prophets of economic progress. Women were not, however, expected to become public leaders of the religious community."⁵

Undaunted, Antoinette Brown took off for Oberlin College, presided over by the same Charles Finney who had so influenced her father years before. It was then a new college, sponsored by the Congregationalist Church, and it had a well-deserved reputation for radicalism, both because of its staunch abolitionism and because it opened its doors to women. (The first women recipients of baccalaureate degrees in the United States are all Oberlin graduates.) In four years she completed the literary course, received special limited permission to study theology, and published an article on the position of women in the New Testament. But in the end, Oberlin refused to ordain her. "They were on the very brink of the fatal spring over the great wall of custom," Brown wrote in a letter to her good friend Lucy Stone, later her sister-in-law and a well-known feminist and suffragist. "A little more and I should have been a man acknowledged minister, but somebody happened to think that though a woman might preach she ought not to administer the sacraments, &c. Others thought this and that, so they joined hands and turning round walked backwards together, and I took up my bundle and walked home."⁶

Fortunately for Brown (and for us), she was hired by a tiny Congregationalist church in South Butler, New York. The church turned to her, apparently, because nobody else would accept the paltry \$300 annual salary that the parish could afford. So it was, from the beginning, that women were condemned to the lower-status and lower-paying jobs in the profession. For a time, nevertheless, she was satisfied. "The pastoral labors at S.

Butler suit me even better than I expected," she wrote, "and my heart is full of hope."⁷ Within a few months, the church decided formally to ordain its new woman pastor—a step that was fully in keeping with Congregationalist policy (many Congregationalist ministers were ordained by their churches rather than by their seminaries). There was some trouble locating a minister to perform the ordination, but finally a nearby Methodist minister agreed to do the honors, aided by the abolitionist reformer Gerrit Smith. Thus, on September 15, 1853, surrounded by a large crowd of friends and neighbors and in the midst (inevitably) of a violent rainstorm, Antoinette Brown was ordained. Two months later, she officiated at her first wedding—an event widely noted in the American press as the first American marriage ever solemnized by a woman. One month after that she delivered a lecture that won her the following accolade. (Remember that public speaking was a critical, almost a threshold skill that women who sought to achieve public status at that time needed to acquire).

Her lecture was sprinkled all over with rich metaphors, with graphic figures, and that rare quality of modern productions, originality. The ideas expressed were clothed in beautiful language, such as none but the finest intellectual gifts could produce, sentences superbly framed, periods rounded with a grace not surpassed by the numberless gems of the great English essayists...There is not one that did not leave the hall with the most profound respect for the rare mental endowments of the speaker.⁸

This outward success, however, masked inner problems. As a result, only eight months later, in July 1854, Antoinette Brown resigned from her parish in South Butler. Loneliness, depression, a crisis of faith, tensions within her parish (especially with women church members), personal and professional insecurity, a sense that her feminist friends such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucy Stone had turned away from her now that she had cast her lot with organized religion—all of these factors compounded by a breakdown in her physical health led Brown to return to the protective womb of her parental home to rest. She would never formally minister to a church again.

Instead, once she recovered, she turned to the other vehicle through which women of her day could affect her world: She took up writing, encouraged by Horace Greeley of the *New York Tribune*. Two years later, in 1856 (at the age of thirty-one), she married a businessman from Cincinnati named Samuel Blackwell. We would consider him a “liberated man,” given the encouragement that he gave to his wife’s activities and more substantively, his willingness to take upon himself the domestic chores that she so disliked. (He even came from a liberated family: His brother married Lucy Stone; his sister, Elizabeth, became one of the nation’s first woman doctors.) Together the couple had seven children, five of whom lived beyond infancy. The Reverend Antoinette Brown Blackwell, as she now called herself, remained—although not without considerable difficulty—actively involved in the women’s movement, delivering lectures around the country, promoting women’s rights and suffrage, establishing credentials in science (we would say social science), writing eight books and countless articles, helping to found the Association for the Advancement of Women, and maintaining her lifelong interest in religion and theology. She may not have held her own parish, but she ministered to her friends. “Everybody leaned on her,” one acquaintance recalled. “Hers was the true vocation of the clergyman.”⁹ In her late seventies, having become a Unitarian, Brown Blackwell helped to establish a Unitarian society in her new hometown of Elizabeth, New Jersey. In recognition of her services, she was appointed “minister emeritus” and she took up her old skills, preaching there once a month until she turned ninety. At age ninety-five, she voted in her first presidential election, having lived long enough to see the women’s suffrage amendment enacted. A year later, she died peacefully in her sleep.

The story of Antoinette Brown Blackwell’s career seemed to me worth recalling here for two reasons. First, her pioneering experiences as America’s first woman clergy person suggests certain themes that have continuing relevance. The travails that she experienced both in her studies and in her first position, her inner religious doubts, her later conflict between the demands of family and the demands of public life, and her decision not to pursue a minister’s standard career path—all these were themes that would continue to characterize the experiences of women clergy down to our

own day. As we consider some of these same themes at this conference it is, I think, well to recall that women have been grappling with these issues for a long time, even before 1972.

It is no less significant to point out that in her own way, using the knowledge, the skills, the professional competence, and even the title that she acquired in becoming a minister, Brown Blackwell did ultimately help to change the world: through her writings, through her lectures, through her work on behalf of women’s rights. Ministerial training for her was a form of what would today be called “radical empowerment”: It liberated her from the shackles that held back most mid-nineteenth-century women, and it gave her the confidence to tackle some of the great social and religious issues of her day. I would argue that women’s ordination is still an act of radical empowerment. Historians who look back a century from now on today’s women rabbis will, I think, again see, just as we do looking back at Antoinette Brown Blackwell, how significant professional training and the act of ordination have been in transforming lives: women rabbis’ own lives (whether or not they choose the congregational rabbinate), the lives of those they touch, and ultimately the Jewish community and American society as a whole.

There is, however, a second observation about Antoinette Brown Blackwell’s career that seems to me no less relevant. Her pioneering success was not followed by a great movement of other women into the clergy ranks.¹⁰ The 1880 census listed some 165 women ministers with parish jobs, 33 of whom were Unitarians or Universalists. Other women rose to positions of leadership in some of the smaller religious movements, like the Spiritualist movement in the mid-nineteenth century, which granted women complete equality,¹¹ and later the Holiness movement, the Pentecostal movement, and Christian Science, where women played an important role from the beginning. Taken all together, however, we are talking about a very small number of women indeed. Most nineteenth-century Americans continued to think of religious leadership as a male preserve.

Protestantism offered women a far more significant public role in the realm of religious and social action. In the United States, Protestant women could serve as missionaries (foreign and domestic), as deaconesses, and as

religious educators—all roles that opened up totally new opportunities for women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Protestant women were also encouraged to battle on behalf of great religious and social causes, the best known being temperance, a movement in which women played a particularly significant part. These various opportunities gave Protestant women greater visibility, as well as leadership experience, and a sense of religious self-worth. They prepared the groundwork, in many ways, for the ordination that came later.

Judaism, by contrast, was much slower to open up significant religious vocational opportunities to women. Admittedly, the Jewish Sunday school, Jewish women's benevolent societies, Jewish immigrant aid organizations, and especially Hadassah, the Zionist women's organization, did provide women with some of these opportunities. The early Hadassah nurses' settlements had much in common, functionally speaking, with Protestant women's foreign missions. Nevertheless, Jews were never historically as successful as Protestants in summoning women to work for social betterment within the context of their faith; certainly, Judaism never offered women a bona fide religious title on a par with missionary or deaconess. As a result, Jewish women have lacked the kinds of female religious role models that Protestants have had in comparative abundance; Henrietta Szold, I think, is the exception that proves the rule. This absence of exemplars probably made it more difficult for Jewish women to gain ordination and then to win acceptance from their congregants.

Still, even in American Protestantism, the ordination of women only began to become normative in mainline denominations in the 1950s. The Presbyterian Church (northern) and the Methodist Church both voted to ordain women in 1956, and at about the same time both Harvard and Yale Divinity Schools began to accept women into their programs on an equal basis with men. In 1970, two major Lutheran denominations voted to ordain women. In 1972, when Sally Priesand was ordained, fully 3,358 women were enrolled in major American theological seminaries, representing about 10 percent of students then studying for ordination.¹²

Thus, the decision to ordain women for the rabbinate, while a path-breaking step for the Reform movement and for American Judaism gener-

ally, did not break any new ground at all in terms of American religion. In fact, the Reform movement was a comparative latecomer to the process, coming 119 years after Antoinette Brown Blackwell was ordained and many years after liberal churches had begun to ordain women—not just the Unitarians and the Universalists but even, as we have seen, the Presbyterians and the Methodists. This fact should serve as a humbling reminder that American Judaism is not always in the forefront of change, nor does it blindly imitate every innovation in American Christianity according to some supposed rule that “as go the Gentiles so go the Jews.” Instead, there has always been a much more complex (and sometimes an exceedingly slow) process by which reforms have been evaluated, a process that involves a careful balancing of tradition and change, costs and benefits, religious ideas and social realities.

Taking this point a step further, it seems to me (heretical as it may sound here) that Judaism—yes, even Reform Judaism—has not historically been at the forefront of change in American religious life. On the contrary, as a minority faith, rooted in a system of law, blessed with a long religious tradition, and cursed with a long history of persecution, Judaism has quite understandably been reluctant to lead the way into uncharted religious territory. *Initiatives* for change—in this case the ordination of women, but the same was true for mixed seating—have generally come from without. Progressive Judaism has then moved, almost always more quickly than other branches of Judaism, to *respond* to new social and religious developments, challenging other branches of Judaism to respond in kind.

Notes

1. Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977), 132.
2. On Christian hymnody, see Erik Routley, *A Panorama of Christian Hymnody* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1979), 115, as cited in Ruth A. Tucker and Walter Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1987), 256.
3. Tucker and Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church*, 253.
4. Quotes are from *ibid.*, 258-59.
5. Elizabeth Cazden, *Antoinette Brown Blackwell: A Biography* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1983), 14-15. Most of what follows is drawn from this fine biography.
6. Brown to Stone, August 4, 1852, in Carol Lasser and Marlene Deahl Merrill, *Friends and Sisters: Letters Between Lucy Stone and Antoinette Brown Blackwell, 1846-93* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 120.
7. Quoted in Cazden, *Antoinette Brown Blackwell*, 75.
8. Quoted in *ibid.*, 62.
9. Quoted in *ibid.*, 227.
10. For what follows, see *ibid.*; Tucker and Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church*, 245-400; Virginia Lieson Brereton and Christa Ressmeyer Klein, "American Women in Ministry: A History of Protestant Beginning Points," in *Women in American Religion*, edited by Janet Wilson James (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), 171-90; Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller, eds., *Women & Religion*

in *America: A Documentary History*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 3:223-383.

11. Ann D. Braude, "Spirits Defend the Rights of Women: Spiritualism and Changing Sex Roles in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Women, Religion and Social Change*, edited by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Ellison Banks Findly (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 419-32.

12. Brereton and Klein, "American Women in Ministry," 186-90; Tucker and Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church*, 376-89; Constant H. Jaquet, Jr., ed., *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches* 58 (1990): 282.