

Sh'ma

a journal of Jewish responsibility

9/164, DECEMBER 22, 1978

Should women be conservative rabbis?

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In January 1979 the members of the Rabbinical Assembly of the Conservative movement will vote at their convention in Los Angeles on whether or not to admit women rabbis as members. The R. A. accepts graduates of other accredited rabbinical schools (besides the Jewish Theological Seminary) for membership if they meet additional qualifications. Hence women from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and the Hebrew Union College — Jewish Institute of Religion may soon qualify for membership in the R. A. Anticipating this situation, an interdisciplinary "Commission for the Study of the Ordination of Women as Rabbis" (by the Conservative movement) was created in June 1977 to recommend a policy based on the study of traditional sources and on the testimony of members of the Conservative movement. More important, if the Conservative rabbinate votes to accept women as members, the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Rabbi Gerson Cohen, has stated that he will abide by such a decision and encourage acceptance of women to the rabbinical school.

This is more than an issue concerning women. What is at stake here is whether or not a movement can institute fundamental changes in the *halachah* and retain the foundation upon which Jewish tradition is built. All the major groups except the Orthodox agree that changes may be made in the *halachah*. The Reform and Reconstructionist movements incorporated the notion of the flexibility of *halachah* into their theologies,

while the Conservative movement has decided that if there is room within the tradition, or if there is a precedent, changes may be instituted with great care. Once it is determined that the lines of rabbinic authority may be drawn elsewhere than in the Orthodox decisors, the question arises whether such lines need be drawn at all. To this, the Conservative movement has answered in the affirmative. Indeed, the areas where they differ from the Orthodox are quite few, and that is why it is of note when the Conservative movement considers a major change, particularly one with little or no historical precedent. So far, they have decided that women may be called to the Torah, counted to a *minyan*, etc. However, this is only a permission, not necessarily a widely adopted practice. With women being granted full ritual equality in the Jewish community, it would be obvious that an irrevocable break with Orthodoxy had occurred.

What follows are essentially statements made to the Commission's hearings in Minneapolis and New York and Washington, D.C. The first is composed of testimony from Minneapolis which has been edited to present the most cogent arguments for and against the ordination of women. The hearings there turned out to be surprisingly one-sided, leading to the possible interpretations that Minneapolis is atypical, or the opposition to the proposal has been overrated or that its opponents have chosen not to speak up. The second and third articles present two women's views on the impact this vote could have on the movement.

To change a tradition: one city's views

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The work of the Conservative Movement's Commission to Study the Ordination of Women as Rabbis reached local communities in the fall of 1978 when its members convened hearings across the country on the controversial subject. Commission members Rabbi Fishel Pearlmuter and Rabbi Gordon Tucker travelled to Minneapolis—St. Paul on 13 September 1978 to accept testimony from the region's Conservative Jews. The Jews of this area were informed of this event through synagogue newsletters, informal networks, and an article in the *Minneapolis Tribune*. After six hours of intense testimony from forty-