

Schools Need Leadership, Too: The OU and Day School Education

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Editors' Note: *The Orthodox Union's recent statement regarding professional roles for women in Orthodox synagogues has sparked heated debate for the sake of heaven. In the hopes of contributing to that ongoing conversation, Lehrhaus has convened a symposium to reflect upon the statement. Over the course of the next week we will post further installments, so please check back frequently. Each contribution will contain links to the other pieces in the symposium.*

Symposium Contributions: Sara Wolkenfeld, Tzvi Sinensky, Shmuel Winiarz, Leah Sarna, Rivka Press Schwartz, Matt Reingold, Laura Shaw Frank, Chaim Twerski, Chaim Trachtman, Shayna Goldberg, Shaul Robinson, Todd Berman, Jeffrey Fox, Elli Fischer, Jeffrey Woolf, Zev Eleff & Ari Lamm

Sara Wolkenfeld

The question of who can and cannot be clergy has ramifications beyond the realm of the synagogue. Day school education offers an important lens through which to read the recent findings of the rabbinic panel, convened by the Orthodox Union, on the halachic permissibility of women clergy. After all, day school education is seen as a core value by many in our community. Read against the backdrop of the OU statement on clergy, it is worth re-examining what transpires in our schools.

The statement opens by celebrating the advances in women's learning. Full disclosure: I am a beneficiary of those advances. I owe so much to the institutions that educated me, to my parents, to the philanthropists who helped endow those institutions, and to the vision and action of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. He delivered the inaugural Talmud class to women at Stern College in 1977, just a few years before I was born, and I was blessed to attend schools that furnished me with the skills to learn and teach Torah. Though not every educator or educational environment was one that treated me as an equal to my male peers, I had teachers and role models who encouraged me to take an active role in teaching others.

Nonetheless, I was the exception, not the norm. Women did not give *divrei Torah*, *derashot*, or regular *shiurim* in my shul. In fact, women did not attend most *shiurim* in my shul. My early memories of *shiur* attendance are mostly of me, my father (z"l), and the men. I did not have a female Talmud teacher until I was twenty-seven years old, about a year after the first time I heard a woman deliver a *drasha* in an Orthodox shul.

Imagine that you teach high school biology. For most of the students in the class, you assume that this will be important background knowledge in their lives. A well-educated adult should know some biology; it may not be relevant to his or her career, but it will be important to understand medical decisions, caring for oneself and one's children, etc. However, some students—one or two each year, perhaps—will excel, some may specialize, a handful will become physicians, and some may come back years later with a PhD or a career in the very field that we teach. Ideally, the teacher will have all these outcomes in mind, and will teach all students with an eye towards those possible outcomes. And the same ought to be true for all fields of general studies.

Of course, this was not—and is not—always true. There was a time when a science class would implicitly assume that boys would be the doctors and girls would be the nurses. Even now, research shows that there are sometimes gender differences in terms of the way teachers encourage boys and girls to pursue their interest in certain subjects. And there continue to be gender differences in the rates at which students enter advanced studies in STEM fields.

What informs us when we teach Torah to our students? Certainly we want it to infuse their lives with Torah principles and values. We also want them to pass it on to their children. But do we place limits on the extent to which we want them to pursue it? Are we teaching boys and girls differently, and if so, are we aware of and transparent about the ramifications of those educational differences? These questions apply not just in terms of curriculum, but also regarding how we teach and speak to our students. Does your school teach Talmud to boys and not to girls?

One implication—and result—being that boys (and men) are expected to have a higher level of literacy than girls. Does your school teach boys to read and interpret texts independently, while girls are “spoon-fed” the material? The implication is that girls will not need these textual skills, and the result is that they will not have them. Does your school ever mention an idea or insight contributed by a woman in the post-Biblical period? If not, girls will intuit that women have no role to play in shaping the dynamics of their religious landscape. Do school leaders show respect for female religious leaders? Witnessing respectful and even deferential treatment of female scholars will help both boys and girls understand that people of both genders can have influential and religiously significant roles in our community. Even years later I cherish the memory of the day when the rabbi who taught our *halakhah shiur* at Nishmat told us that Rabbi Yehuda Henkin would be delivering a *shiur* that evening. “You know who he is, right? He’s married to your Rosh Yeshiva.”

Copious research attests to the fact that even unconscious attitudes towards gender norms can impact how teachers relate to students in the classroom and, in turn, how students relate to the material they learn. The OU’s recent statement ensures that, by and large, the Torah education Modern Orthodox students see on Shabbat will be done by men. And this undoubtedly sends a

message: Boys and girls alike perceive that men, and not women, carry authority in the realm of Torah. Men's ideas have value and their voices are meant to be heard by all, whereas women listen passively and absorb information that comes from men.

Day schools must find ways to encourage girls and women to learn Torah seriously and to share that learning, if we want to take seriously the commitment to "fully utilize" the "talent and commitments" of women. If students see primarily male leadership teaching Torah on Shabbat, then Modern Orthodox educators will have to find ways to counterbalance that picture during the week. Otherwise, our children may very well interpret these asymmetries as signaling that Torah leadership and values are only for men.

The statement tells us "Let us focus our energy and communal creativity on increasing and enhancing the contributions that women make to our shuls and communities, rather than being consumed with limitations." Yes, let us do that. So here are some potential ways to engage in this project; I welcome my colleagues to share their ideas as well.

1. We need to be more self-reflective about our biases, both conscious and unconscious, about the proper role of men and women in the world of Torah and mitzvot. These biases will inform our teaching, whether we intend them to or not, and we need to be sure that our intentions are appropriate to our context and our students. Will our teaching strategies in fact advance the goal of "increasing and enhancing" women's contributions? In our ideal world as educators, who will our students become?
2. If, like me, you are willing to cooperate with the OU's emphasis on expanding the contributions that women can make to a synagogue community, public Torah-related speaking roles must be open to both boys and girls, and to men and women, within the school community. Again, if the children in your school attend an OU shul, you can assume the balance of leadership in their synagogues tilts heavily towards men. It is therefore up to our day schools to identify opportunities to counterbalance what our students experience in our synagogues.
3. The curriculum must be equally rigorous and serious for boys and girls. If the curriculum is different, can you plausibly explain to the students why this is so? If you believe in an ideology of "different but somehow equal," hiding curricular decisions and their implications from the girls only makes them feel less valued.
4. Girls and women need "educated, knowledgeable, and halakhically committed role models." Again, this is something we can all agree on. The OU, as a synagogue association, focuses on synagogue roles. But to make good on this objective means finding titles for women that convey their knowledge, erudition, and leadership.
5. There are important roles to be played in schools too. Women can teach all subjects, can serve as inspirational speakers, administrators, leaders of yemei yun, kumsitzes, and holiday-related observances. If we want our educational choices to convey the message that the Torah is for everyone, then schools must make an effort to ensure that men and women play the wide range of roles available within the school environment.

6. Language always matters, and actions speak louder than words: I remember sitting in the halls of my Orthodox high school at mincha time, while male teachers swept the area for male students. They had to go to davening; for us it was unofficially optional. The message was clear. As a female high school student once told me: “The boys need to know much more, because they are obligated in so many more mitzvot.” I hope we can all agree that “so many more” is an overstatement, especially when you consider those mitzvot in which women typically participate (sukkah, shofar, etc.) even if not technically obligated. If we all believe in embracing the talents of women, to echo a phrase from the OU’s statement, then we need to start by educating them to believe that the world of mitzvot encompasses them as much as it does their male peers.
7. And finally, if we are truly to convey that Torah education is the job of both men and women, then we need to put our money where our mouth is. And that means making sure that Jewish institutions embrace pay-equality across the sexes and that current unstated assumptions that men can be paid more than women for the same work be deemed unacceptable.

Several educators have already told me that statements such as these will have no impact on the way they teach. This non-reaction is exactly what I fear. For me, the OU statement was disturbing and alienating, but also catalyzing. Whatever triggered the work of this panel, the larger backdrop is certainly the unprecedented education that my peers and I received. Whatever the next stage looks like—whether or not there will ultimately be titles and roles that the OU can approve and whether or not the community cares—this stage will certainly be shaped by the education that we provide for boys and girls today. Look what has already come about; with the right educational tools, we can do so much more.

Since the release of the OU statement, there has been a flurry of published reactions online and in the Jewish media (which even succeeded in briefly displacing American politics as the central focus of conversation and debate among Modern Orthodox Jews). Many Modern Orthodox feminists critiqued the statement for categorically condemning female clergy. I also know that many Modern Orthodox traditionalists celebrated the statement for defending our community’s traditions from further erosion. Despite their disagreement, both sides expect that this statement will limit or slow change. In contrast, I think the OU statement can be used as a tool to advocate for positive change, particularly in the field of education.

As an educator, I want to encourage our community to highlight and reinforce the statement’s unfulfilled and unmet vision of female scholarship and religious leadership. Formal Jewish education occupies a massive space in our community and yet it has been neglected in our community’s ongoing debates about female religious leadership. It is time to turn our attention back to our schools and yeshivot where even the OU’s position paper calls out for new policies and new priorities.