

Women leadership in Judaism

At a Shiva, one night, in my first year of working here at Jackson's Row, I entered the room of a home I hadn't been to before. As I came into the room someone greeted me – 'Hi Rabbi Robyn'. A few gentlemen, whom I didn't know, were sitting together and one smiled and said, 'you're the prettiest rabbi I've ever seen.' A little shocked, I then smiled back and said – 'well you better not tell your rabbi that, they might feel hurt.'

In the first few months of taking Gabriel, my son, to his school (King David, which is an Orthodox Jewish school) many kids would come up to me in the playground. 'Are you a man?' they would ask? No, I'm not. So why are you wearing a kippah they ask? I gently explain I go to a different type of synagogue where men and women can sit together.

There are many conversations I have had across Manchester, being the first female rabbi in Greater Manchester. Some of them are positive, full of curiosity and others less so.

One evening last month I spent dinner with many other female rabbis in the UK, including Britain's first female rabbi, Rabbi Jackie Tabick – celebrating nearly 45 years since her ordination, now the convenor of our Beit Din, religious court. All these rabbis shared stories – sometimes funny, sometimes not so funny, about situations they had been in. Or questions they'd been asked at their interview to college that were entirely inappropriate and wouldn't have been asked of the male candidates.

Being a woman in this world, particularly one in a leadership role, can be a challenge. And, my goodness, hasn't it been that way for quite some time. Let's re-visit our Torah portion for this week. Unusually this parashah refers to a remarkable number of women. Typically, they are not named but appear as objects of property of men. For instance we read about the wife of a Hebrew slave, the daughter sold into slavery, the mother who was verbally or physically abused, the female slave beaten by her master, the pregnant woman who suffers a miscarriage after being pushed by two men in a fight, the sorceress condemned to death and the vulnerable widow. A list of women subject to violence, owned by others and defined through their relationships to the men around them. Viewed through this lens it's not an easy read.

Another difficult read is the book 'Invisible Women' by Caroline Criado Perez, which I am halfway through at the moment. Like the system of law laid out in the Torah, the author shows us how, in a world largely built for and by men, we are systematically ignoring half the population. The book's publicity reads, "Imagine a world where your phone is too big for your hand, where your doctor prescribes a drug that is wrong for your body, where in a car accident you are 47% more likely to be seriously injured, where every week the countless hours of work you do are not recognised or valued. If any of this sounds familiar, chances are that you're a woman."

I know it isn't easy to hear all of this and we may feel frustrated or confused and worried about men's needs not being met if we focus on women's needs or those whose voices have been marginalised – that's often an argument that is put. But it is our duty as Jews, and humans, to ensure that hidden voices are championed and that the world – which our Torah is committed to – is just and fair. It is about making sure that everyone is given what they need so we have true equality. For we all, regardless of our gender, are victims of a world which does not recognise the needs of all. We suffer together or we thrive together. We all need to be in the fight for change where all of our needs are met.

And we know, here at Jackson's Row that we have been on a journey in terms of women's empowerment. Many will remember a heated EGM (extraordinary general

meeting) when the issue of women carrying Torah scrolls was raised. The vote passed but it was a difficult time for our community.

Recently I was reading Rabbi Dr Tony Bayfield's book, 'Being Jewish Today' (a great read by the way). And on one page it read, on a chapter about women in liberal and reform synagogues, "it could only have been a British Reform synagogue that, in the 1930s, embraced mixed seating but reserved the first four rows for 'men with scruples'". I followed the footnote, knowing which synagogue I would find, and yes, it was us. We have had a bit of a reputation in relation to women's participation and a quick glance at the boards downstairs recording our presidents and treasurers we'll see just one woman named – Lisa Stock - in our 165 year plus history. But how times have changed and are changing! And we know that, although there have been bumps along the way, we have always had strong female leaders in our community – be that in the Ladies Guild, the choir, on these seats or on Council.

There is still much work to do to empower women in our community to take part up here or elsewhere. For instance, many of our 13-year-old girls opt out of having a Bat-Mitzvah as some families are unused to the idea and don't feel it's necessary in the way they do for their sons.

We have had a week here in Manchester, suffragette city that it is, where some of us marched on Reclaim the night with Manchester University students. And we are part of GM Citizens which has campaigned for Misogyny to be a hate crime, alongside antisemitism and other hate crimes. We have taken part in a Law Commission consultation, members of our community giving testimony on abuse they have faced as women and Jews. And just this week members of our community have recorded a film to help train police officers in antisemitism and misogyny for we have many women who have experienced hate based on their religion and gender. We are raising our voices together to make sure our world is one where we can admit the wound of patriarchy – a system which negatively affects us all where power is gifted to a few hands and our potential as individuals and communities is weakened.

As we read our portions about taking a census of all the men of fighting age, we here ensure we listen to the social ethic at the heart of the Torah which demands we recognise the divine image in each one of us and ensure that we work towards the liberation for all. We may want to ask ourselves what commitment we are making, what healing needs to happen, and what celebrations we can take on a journey to further empowerment for women, and all, here and outside these doors.

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