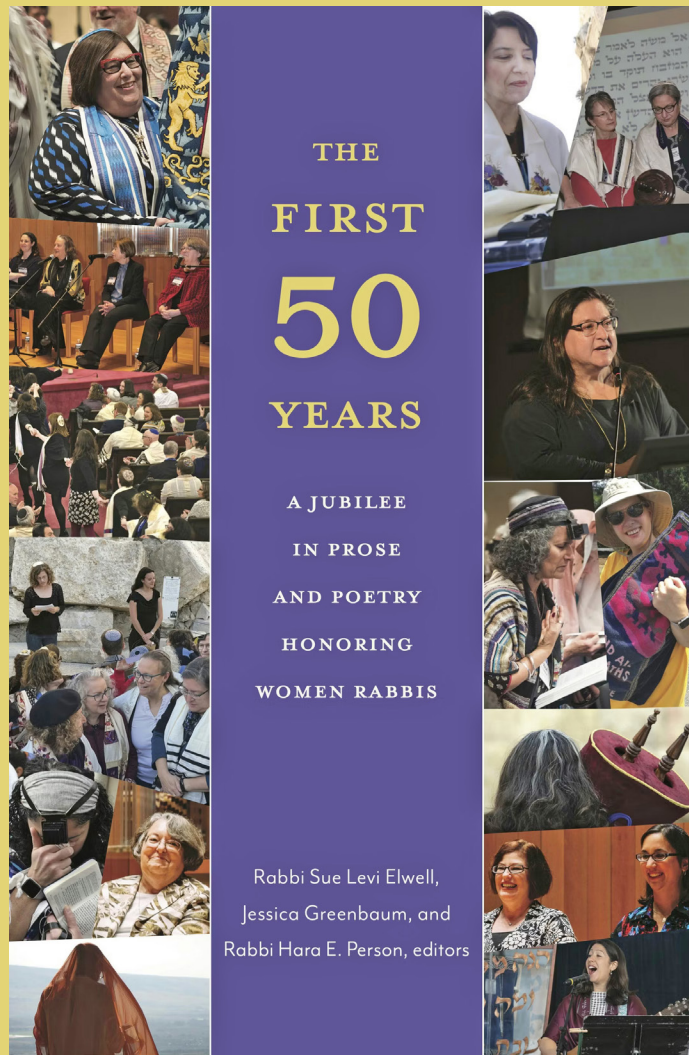




The First Fifty Years

A Jubilee in Prose and Poetry

Honoring Women Rabbis

STUDY AND DISCUSSION GUIDE
by Rabbi Annie Villarreal-Belford, PsyD



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Contents

INTRODUCTION	I
THEME 1: Women and other marginalized Jews who were excluded from full participation in Jewish life	2
THEME 2: The ongoing revolution that began when Rabbi Sally J. Priesand was ordained in 1972	3
THEME 3: The power and impact of having diverse role models and leadership	4
THEME 4: The doors opened to others since 1972	5
THEME 5: The work that still remains to ensure full inclusion, equality, and equity for all Jews	6

Introduction

IN HER INTRODUCTION to *The First Fifty Years: A Jubilee in Prose and Poetry Honoring Women Rabbis*, Rabbi Hara E. Person—the first female chief executive of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Reform Movement’s rabbinic arm—writes that “this collection serves as a mile marker along the journey, a momentary stopping place for reflection and commemoration. While we experience the evolution of women in the rabbinate as inevitable, that doesn’t mean it was easy” (xxxii). Indeed, the dozens of poems, reflections, and submissions in this volume give voice to the many people who were excluded from full participation in Jewish life and the struggles faced on the road to inclusion. It also contains reflections full of celebration and gratitude for the people who have created a wider and more inclusive Jewish community, and highlights the ripple effects of wider representation. It is in every sense a jubilee—a celebration of the fiftieth year (see Leviticus 25:10) since women were first ordained as rabbis.

This study guide highlights five main themes that run throughout the volume:

(1) The women and other marginalized Jews who were excluded; (2) the ongoing revolution that began when Rabbi Sally J. Priesand was ordained in 1972; (3) the power and impact of having diverse role models and leadership in the Jewish community; (4) the doors that have opened to other marginalized groups since women started being ordained; (5) and the work that still remains to ensure full inclusion, equality, and equity for all Jews. The questions below bring different poems and reflections into conversation with one another, with the hope that group conversations deepen the themes in the book and those delineated above.

As Rabbi Person notes, “today we recognize that the rabbinate is made up not only of men and women, but also rabbis with diverse gender identities. This knowledge, too, is grounded in Torah . . . [that] celebrates inclusivity” (xxxii).

*THEME I: Women and other marginalized Jews who were excluded
from full participation in Jewish life*

Questions

1. For thousands of years, Judaism was a patriarchal religion that centered men's experiences and voices. Imagine for a moment that you lived in time centuries before women and non-binary folks had equal footing with men. What do you think it was like to be a marginalized Jew living in a dominant patriarchal Judaism? What experiences would you yearn to have acknowledged? What emotions arise for you when you imagine living in a time before women were ordained? For reference and inspiration, see "As One Awakens after a Long Sleep," 2; "Hungry God Touch," 27; "Telling Our Stories," 35; "If God Could," 41; "Rightful Places," 80; and "Rebekka the Voice Teacher," 82.
2. Many people remember a time before women were ordained (see "Reform Judaism, 1960s, Long Island," 34). Indeed, fifty years is a small sliver of time when considering all of Jewish history. If you were alive before women were ordained, share your memories of Jewish life from that time with someone who has taken women rabbis as a given. If you were born after 1972 and always knew about women rabbis, find a person who has experienced Judaism before 1972 and ask them about their experiences. Do you/they remember the news when Sally Priesand was ordained? How has your/their experience of Judaism changed since then?
3. Some writers share their own feelings of pain and loss when thinking about becoming a rabbi or when thinking about the women in their families who were not permitted to become rabbis (see "Women Rabbis," 10; "Had There Been a Woman," 37; "Rabbi's Daughter," 102; and "Park Slope / Chelsea," 104.) What can we learn from these feelings of pain and loss? What doors have been closed to you? What doors do you see that are still closed to women and other marginalized groups?
4. In our prayer book, we pray to the "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob, God of Sarah, God of Rebecca, God of Rachel, and God of Leah, the great, mighty and awesome God, transcendent God, who bestows loving kindness, creates everything out of love, remembers the love of our fathers and mothers, and brings redemption to their children's children..." (see *Mishkan T'filah*, 166). If you were praying to the God of Regina Jonas (see "Eighty-Seven Years, Not Fifty!" on 26), the God of Helen Leventhal, Dr. Dora Askowith, Irma Levy Lindheim, and Martha Neumark Montor (see "The Pioneers Who Paved the Way," 7), and the God of Henrietta Szold (see "Birthrights," 97), what adjectives to describe God would be included in your prayer? What do you think is the connection between our theology and beliefs about God, and the messages of the leaders of the Jewish community?

THEME 2: The ongoing revolution that began when Rabbi Sally J. Priesand was ordained in 1972

Questions

1. One of the themes that emerges from this volume is that many of the “firsts,” the *vatikot*, felt an overwhelming sense of obligation to represent *all* women as well as future women who could be rabbis (for example, see “A First Step,” 3; “Blessed Be the Firsts,” 4; “*Because I Am a Woman*,” 9; “Changing the Fabric of Israeli Society,” 46; “Representing All the Others,” 47; and many others). In contrast, some writers talked about the ability to be less-than perfect (for example, see “Good Enough,” 21; and “Without the Pressure of Success,” 52). Do you think there remains an extra layer of expectation of and pressure on women rabbis? What would it take for rabbis of all genders to have the same expectations?
2. A number of men reflect on how their rabbinates and the Jewish world has changed because of women’s ordination (for example, see “Stepping into History,” 20; “A New Jewish Narrative,” 22; “The Greatest Legacy of Fifty Years,” 23; “The First,” 29; “The Unthinkable Became Imaginable,” 48; “To Have a Voice,” 81; “The Presence of Women Rabbis,” 103; “From Strength to Strength,” 106). How do you think the past fifty years have changed the rabbinate for people of all genders? What can men learn from women rabbis? What can cis-gender people learn from transgender and nonbinary people?
3. Rabbi Sally J. Priesand writes in “A First Step” (3) that “All people are created *b’tzelem Elohim*, in God’s image. We are one human family, all of us God’s children, and all of us worthy of dignity and respect . . .” She also writes that while part of her life’s work was to open doors for other women in the Jewish community, she also had a larger mission “to derive from the words of Torah a set of values and a sense of holiness that enable us always to be partners with God in completing the world.” Similarly, Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso—the first woman ordained in the Reconstructionist Movement—writes “having been on the periphery, we sought to include the margins” (“What We Have Learned,” 8). Do you think women rabbis, or rabbis of other marginalized groups, have a unique mission? How can the experience of marginalization shape one’s personal theology?
4. Several authors reflect on the ways the rabbinate has changed and expanded since women were first ordained (see “A Profound Journey,” 11; “Changed for the Better,” 12; “A Legitimate Rabbi,” 13; “The Most Revolutionary Contribution to American Jewry,” 14; “The Expansion of ‘Rabbi,’” 32; “Spiritual Vision,” 33; “Estrogen-Enriched Judaism,” 86; “It Had Never Occurred to Me,” 107). All of these authors are among the *vatikot*, the first women ordained as rabbis between 1972 and 1983, and have unique perspectives of the first fifty years women have served as rabbis. What do you think are the most profound lessons of their experiences? What other dominoes have fallen since the first domino—women’s ordination in 1972—fell? What changes still need to happen?
5. Some women rabbis who were more recently ordained write about the ways their own rabbinate was transformed because they always knew they could become rabbis (see “Just Rabbis,” 53; “Why Do Women Rabbis Matter?,” 94; “Joys Along the Way,” 100; “All In,” 101; “The Rabbinate Was Never Closed to Me,” 116; “A Metaphor of Holiness No Longer!,” 122).

Who were the women who broke down barriers in your profession? Which professions still seem connected to gender, and how can you contribute to breaking those limitations?

6. Women rabbis who also teach at seminaries (see “A New Paradigm and a New Era,” 89; “Not Sitting on the Sidelines,” 96; “A New Learning Was Being Born,” 56; “Clearing Paths,” 71; “A Reawakened Dream,” 110) have a unique role in defining and shaping future rabbis. Does the gender of our teachers matter? Why or why not? How do you think having women rabbis as professors and teachers changes the broader rabbinate?
7. Compare the poems “Let my people go that we may serve You” (5) and “Here I Am” (125). What similarities do the poets express? What are the differences? Do you relate to any of the messages in the poems?
8. Some authors share the ways they have been personally shaped by being a rabbi (“Just Souls,” 51; “Finding My Voice,” 79). In what ways is the rabbinate a unique profession? In what ways is it similar to other professions? Do you think your profession has had a profound impact on who you have become?

THEME 3: The power and impact of having diverse role models and leadership

Questions

1. Read the poems “Bar Mitzvah” (17), “*L’dor Vador*, Muckwanago, Wisconsin, 1994” (18), and “Women Rabbis” (30), and contrast the experiences of Judaism expressed in each. Have you had negative experiences in the Jewish community? What has helped you heal those experiences? What positive experiences have you had in Jewish community?
2. “The Shekhinah as Amnesiac [What every woman rabbi secretly knows]” (24), “If God Could” (41), “What Moses Learned about Sinai in Akiva’s Class: A Proposal and a Personal Memory” (61), and “Love As Strong As Death” (119) all make powerful theological statements and ask challenging theological questions. Do you share the questions these poems ask? What statements about God and the nature of divinity speak most strongly to you? Do you believe our understanding of God changed after women started to lead Jewish communities?
3. “In one of my lives” (44–45), “Mother Psalm 6” (54), “Psalm” (68), “A Pregnant Rabbi Officiates at the Wedding of an Ob-Gyn” (95), “When the Rabbi Asks for the Envelope” (115), and “A Rabbi Who Was Once a Girl” (118) all focus on the ways a rabbi is also a human—in these examples, a mother, a girl, a wife, a pregnant person. These poems seem to break down the wall between the rabbi and the woman. Contrast these images to the quintessential image of male rabbis of a few generations ago, who stood high on the bimah and spoke in a stentorian voice as if it were the speech of God. Do you think it is easier to see women rabbis as more human? What are the benefits of this? What might be the challenges?
4. The power of having women rabbinic role models is expressed in many passages of this book. Focus on “As One Awakens after a Long Sleep” (2), “Our Spiritual Lineage” (25), “A Woman Rabbi Stands on Many Shoulders” (31), “Paying It Forward” (55), and “In the Sanctuary of the Changing World” (90) and consider the importance of role models in a person’s life. How

might today's Judaism be different if the story of Judith had been centered in the Torah and *Tanach*? How do we find and create role models for ourselves? How are we role models for others? Who have been your role models?

5. When gender norms are flipped, it can take many years for the new to become the “new normal.” Read “Normal, Extraordinary” (63), “Role Model” (66), and “Can Boys Be Rabbis, Too?” (121) and compare them with “A Reflection from Thirty-Three Years in the Rabbinate” (99). These reflections offer different responses and assumptions about the gender of rabbis. When you think of a rabbi, what image comes to mind? What internalized assumptions about rabbis do you harbor? If you heard a story set in the past when the rabbi is identified as a woman, what would your reaction be? Do you think women rabbis have become the “new normal”?
6. “Called” (49) and “To Women Rabbis” (76) both offer invitations to women: “Dear sisters of Israel, be bold, be brave, be beautiful,” and “Promise we’ll be humble, worthy, different.” Do you think women who become rabbis have a responsibility to be *different* types of rabbis? Why or why not?

THEME 4: The doors opened to others since 1972

Questions

1. In many ways, women's ordination was just the first step in widening the possibilities of who could become a rabbi. Read “Liberation” (39) and “A Wondrous Explosion” (78). What other groups of people have become able to join the rabbinate since Rabbi Sally Priesand was ordained in 1972?
2. Opening the door to queer rabbis (gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.) followed soon after women's ordination (see “I’ll Show You,” 36; “Breaking Through Centuries of Constriction,” 40; and “Inside the Tent,” 92). However, as with the ordination of women rabbis, there were challenges and much pain along the way (read “No Voice of God,” 74; “Birthrights,” 97; and “Chuppah, Chelsea, May 2000,” 109). What work remains to heal the pain of exclusion? Do you know any queer rabbis? How is their rabbinate unique, and how is it like every other rabbinate?
3. Transgender folks have their own “firsts” of people who are now ordained as rabbis. Read “An Even More Expansive Future” (114) and “The Only Ones” (123) and consider what it is like for a transgender rabbi to both follow in the footsteps of previous generations of boundary breakers and also carry the mantle of breaking boundaries in a new way. What questions would you ask one of the first transgender clergypersons? What barriers do you think they uniquely face?
4. After the Reform Movement ordained Rabbi Sally J. Priesand in 1972 (3), the Reconstructing Judaism Movement ordained Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso in 1974 (8) and the Conservative Movement ordained Rabbi Amy Eilberg in 1985. Rabba Sara Hurwitz writes about becoming the first Orthodox woman to serve as a rabbi in 2009 (see “The Story Is Only Just Beginning,” 62) and Daphne Lazar Price reflects on the history of Jewish Orthodox feminism (see

“Previously Unimaginable,” 59). Have you met women rabbis from other streams of Judaism? In what ways might Orthodox women rabbis have a different role than women rabbis of other movements? What do you think would need to happen for additional sects of Judaism—such as Sephardic, Chasidic, and ultra-Orthodox groups—to eventually ordain women?

5. In her submission, Rabbi Nikki DeBlosi, PhD, writes that “we should know deeply that difference and distinction and variety are not the problem” (120). Read her piece, followed by “Who Am I?” by Rabbi Rebecca L. Dubowe (72) and “In Her Hands: Notes from a *Soferet*” by Rabbi Bec Richman (87). Why does representation matter? How does the variety of different rabbis enhance the Jewish community? What challenges might this diversity cause?

THEME 5: The work that still remains to ensure full inclusion, equality, and equity for all Jews

Questions

1. Both “What She Loves” (64) and “An Offering Made in Honor of Those Who Have No Time to Make an Offering” (112) address the tension of having too little time as women and as rabbis, but from different perspectives. Many women rabbis regularly hear, “I don’t know how you do it.” What do you think informs this sentiment? Do you think there are added burdens of time placed on women rabbis, and women professionals in general?
2. Read “These Fifty Years” (17), “Worlds within Worlds” (111), and “Compelled by the ‘Almosts’” (117). Each author decries the ways our society seems to have stalled or even fallen backwards in regards to equality. Do you agree with their assessments about the world today? What work still remains to ensure equality and equity among all people? How can you contribute to that work?
3. Some authors write with pain about challenges that they and other women have faced in the Jewish community (see “Why I Didn’t Become a Rabbi,” 57; “All the Answers and Excuses in the World,” 67; and “An Older Woman,” 108). Do you think that “Judaism can really be feminist without starting from scratch” (57)? How do “isms”—ageism, sexism, ableism, classism, racism, and other forms of discrimination—keep people from fulfilling their dreams? What types of discrimination have you faced that impacted your life choices? How can you combat these forms of discrimination? How can you ensure the Jewish community continues to combat these forms of discrimination?
4. Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell, one of the editors of this volume, writes about learning to “wield new tools” (77) in the effort to create a more open and just Jewish world. Similarly, Judith Rosenbaum, PhD, writes about the “creativity sparked by women in the rabbinate” (124). Both authors argue that women’s unique position in the Jewish world today can create, energize, and revitalize the Jewish community. How have women rabbis uniquely impacted you and your community? Do you agree that we are just at the beginning of a new era in Jewish life? How can you be a part of creating an expanded and renewed vision of Judaism? Who else needs to become part of the expanded vision to further revitalize the Jewish community?