

Authority without apology

A woman rabbi in Israel reflects on leadership, feminism, and spiritual responsibility in a wounded nation

By Rabbi Talia Avnon Benveniste

I WAS born on Kibbutz Hamadiya in the Beit She'an Valley. The Gilboa mountains and the Jordan River were my first classroom in Judaism: earth, seasons, Hebrew poetry, and pioneer stories. The Bible was not a book on a shelf but an open-air class, where the hills and valleys of our texts stood before our eyes.

Judaism, for me, was alive rather than primarily theological. Faith was a private conversation, not an institution. Community and responsibility for Israeli society shaped my belonging long before I had the language of religious authority.

The rabbinate ripened in me slowly, through teaching and prayer, through accompanying people at delicate thresholds, and through building frameworks of meaning. Again and again, I found myself doing the work before I had the words. I was not inventing a new self; I was naming what was already alive within me. I was not breaking down a door, but walking through a doorway I had stood at for years.

Charged space

In Reform Judaism, I found a values-based home where equality for women is read as spiritual truth and moral responsibility, and where authority is tested by its capacity to awaken life, carry meaning, and hold covenant between people, community, and tradition.

To be a woman rabbi in Israel is to work

inside a charged space. The rabbinate here is not only a spiritual vocation; it is a crossroads where religion, culture, and politics align. I often stand between institutions that expect uniform authority and people who ask for a listening presence.

COURTESY



Rabbi Talia Avnon Benveniste

You feel the tension in small details: on the radio, a man is addressed as “rabbi,” while I am called by my first name. In public panels, women sometimes speak last, even when the topic is our expertise.

Families who ask for an egalitarian wedding still reach out to a male rabbi, not a woman rabbi – as if this is where equality must stop. These moments do not discourage me. Instead, they refine the mission: to articulate what authority is and where it comes from.

Within that work, a historical and spiritual calling emerged. When I was called to head the Reform rabbinical seminary in Israel, I did not see a figure at the top but a link in a chain. For the first time here, a woman stands in this role and confers ordination.

At our most recent ceremony, I stood before a living continuum of teachers and students, books and voices, and I heard the ancient movement in which authority is not a possession; it is a trust handed from generation to generation. My hands granted permission to serve, to raise servants of the sacred and shape an ethic of calling and responsibility. This is my craft: to open gates until a Beit Midrash becomes a home, and



to let ordination be a point of light along a path of service.

Feminism as craft

From tradition to life: a couple asked for a wedding that honors halachic language yet stands on real equality. We sat with the sources to ask what they seek to say and how to say it today with integrity.

The ceremony that emerged was not a compromise, but a covenant. This is feminism as craft – a careful creation of shared language that honors both the tradition and the people who stand within it.

A shortened prayer scene: in many communities, the siddur can feel distant. In Tefillat HaAdam, traditional words sit beside modern Hebrew poetry and familiar Israeli songs. Recognition softens faces; a line from the radio slips into the service; the ancient text gains context. After one service, a man said quietly, “the ancient words spoke



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Six new Israeli Reform rabbis, all women, were ordained last year at the Hebrew Union College Taube Family Campus in Jerusalem.

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 tice both. This is not rhetoric. This is an ethic for shared life.

A civic vision

Here, my feminism meets a civic vision. *Machloket l'shem shamayim* – disagreement for the sake of heaven – is not a pretty rabbinic quote. It is a civic discipline. It means creating Jewish public spaces where religious, traditional, Reform, and secular Israelis sit together and practice respect even when the heart pounds.

Reform Judaism brings ready ground for this work: open communities, egalitarian language for women and men, and ritual tools that weave Halacha with civic ethics. It is a wide home where one can say both: deep tradition and inclusion, rootedness and freedom, national responsibility and moral sensitivity.

In an age drawn to either or, such a proposal can stitch a shared fabric – crafting prayers and memorials that honor the pain of different groups, leading lifecycle rituals rooted in equality that are not compromise but covenant, and fostering partnerships that help rebuild public trust.

I know the words “woman rabbi” still make some pause. I choose not to use that pause to prove a point, but to invite listening. My feminism is not merely the right to be called by a title; it is the obligation to fill that title with service. For me, authority is not a booming voice, but the capacity to carry complexity without extinguishing the flame. When the vessel serves life, it earns its legitimacy.

In the end, being a woman rabbi in Israel means choosing presence over power, language over slogan, and faith as a home rather than a mechanism. I do not seek to replace tradition. I seek to return it to its natural movement – a tradition attentive to time, place, and the human heart, and thus capable of holding us together. ■

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to me.” To guard tradition is not only to preserve it, but to let it be heard.

Since October 7, this picture has grown sharper. Israel is wounded: loss, anxiety, captivity, a war that continues, and a social fabric strained from pain, suspicion, and exhaustion.

Yet from within the rupture, a longing for connection has emerged – for words that can hold multiple identities together, for a public language that does not erase one group’s pain to hear another’s. We long for a Jewish space that opens gates rather than closes them.

Here, the rabbinate takes on another layer: presence. Go to the hospital before there are answers. Sit with a family just before

identification. Open a prayer space where *Mi Sheberach* sounds like a cry for rescue. When the room is full of trembling hands, weave Psalms with modern Hebrew song and offer a brief hope – not a promise, but a holding.

Spiritual leadership in wartime is also measured by the long work of healing: accompanying grief that does not end; crafting memorial practices that let pain move; teaching children to speak about fear without letting fear become their identity.

Above all, it means insisting on a public language of both national security and moral responsibility, love of Israel and respect for one another, loyalty to tradition and freedom of conscience. In an age that demands either or, we must prac-

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