

Rabbi Lewis' Message for Summer, 2011

NPR recently broadcast a program that made me smile. The program analyzed what it means to appoint women to boards of directors. The interviewee said: When you put one woman on a board, she is invisible; when you put two women on, it is a conspiracy; when you put more than two on, it is cutting edge.

I smiled because I remember living all those stages. Back when I was ordained in 1980, there were about 20 women rabbis in the Reform movement. It was slowly beginning to dawn on the [Central Conference of American Rabbis](#), a classic “old boys club”, that they were supposed to represent both male and female rabbis. So they (whoever “they” were) decided to put a woman on each board and committee. That was how I came to be appointed to the Committee on Committees (I kid you not – it was the committee that nominated people to sit on other committees). The Committee on Committees met at 11:30 at night in a hotel suite during a CCAR Convention. I was pregnant with Micah at the time; staying up until 11:30 was a challenge. Then I entered a meeting room filled with cigar smoke; not only did I feel invisible (to the world at large, a pregnant female rabbi was hardly invisible), I couldn’t see anything through the haze. It was as if I weren’t there.

I can’t recall all the committees on which I was the only woman, but I know it was many. There just weren’t enough of us to go around in those early days. But I do remember sitting in a meeting that was nominating the CCAR Board. That meeting was at an airport near JFK so that committee members could fly in for the day; it must have been an important meeting. The CCAR executive director at the time kept a file of index cards. Whenever a name was raised for nomination, he would look and say: no, that person hasn’t paid his dues this year – or that person didn’t contribute to a special fund – no, that person never attends CCAR conventions - or other (often subjective) criteria of which I had been completely unaware. Then another name came up and he said, “No, we already have one woman on the Board.” And I remember saying: “Why can’t there be two women on the Board?” That was when I discovered the fear of conspiracy; one woman on the board may be invisible, but two women are perceived as a cabal.

I bless the day that gender no longer was used as a yardstick for committee eligibility. All those years of invisibility and conspiracy had added up and broken the glass ceiling. I remember thinking that maybe things had really changed as a result of our early efforts. All of this has been on my mind as I head to a biennial meeting of the [Women’s Rabbinic Network](#). We began these meetings in the early 80’s when there were too few of us to call it a conference. Now our membership numbers hundreds. Many issues regarding gender have yet to be resolved – issues of maternity

leave, pay parity, work schedule, hiring – are just a few among them. We get together to plan our solutions. But we get together mostly just to be together.

We laugh at old times; we rejoice in each other's celebrations; we weep at each other's losses. The WRN Conference, which rotates around the country, is in New Jersey this year. My friend Rabbi Mindy Portnoy (author of the famous *Ema on the Bimah: My Mommy is a Rabbi*) will be coming up from Washington, DC, and will have spent (by the time you read this) a morning with us at the Jewish Center. Then we will take the trip down to the Jersey Shore for our conference. And apparently there is still some interest in the experience of the earlier "invisible" women. An LA based film director wants to interview some of us for a Story Archive of Women Rabbis: An All-New Digital Web Based Archive. Having suffered through way too many interviews in the early days, I would prefer to lie on the beach and defer to the more recent ordines. I will let you know if I get my wish.

This meeting is always a celebration, as are all the recent and upcoming graduations and b'nai mitzvah (don't forget our adult b'not mitzvah who will ascend the bimah on June 18th). Join us, too, on Sunday June 5 for our congregation-wide Confirmation service in which all the school children participate. It is our 17th, by my count – but who's counting, once the omer is over. May our entrance into summer be filled with good weather, relaxation and celebration.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis