

## **A Female Rabbi Looks at Obama Shabbat Chayei Sarah**

*The following is the sermon given by Rabbi Ellen J. Lewis on November 21, 2008*

The election is over but the ramifications continue. Last weekend, I was at the airport and walked past a row of magazines. The visual was amazing. Each one had Obama on the cover - *Newsweek, Time, US News, The Economist, People, Us*. It was a sea of Obamas. I didn't buy any of them because my backpack was already stuffed full of magazines and newspapers in anticipation of a long layover. In that pile, I read a snippet about Colin Powell, although I don't remember the source. He reported that people used to ask him, "What's it like to be a black Secretary of State?" And he was tempted to answer: "You mean, there's a white one?" What kind of Secretary of State could he be other than black? His comments made me think back to the early days of women in the rabbinate. In a similar vein, when I first entered the rabbinate almost 30 years ago, people would ask: "What's it like to be a woman rabbi?" I, too, had to resist responding: "You mean I have a choice? What other kind of rabbi could I be?"

I am finding there is a deeper post-election connection between the female and the black experience. I had yet to make this connection until the day after the election. My younger son Micah called and said to me in the midst of his excitement: "I imagine you sorta might know better than some people what it feels like to be Barack Obama." My first reaction, - which was, what? I couldn't possibly know what it feels like to be Barack Obama - was quickly followed by my second reaction: maybe there was something to this.

I don't think race and gender barriers are equivalent, but there are some meaningful parallels. There are parallels because we - Barack Obama and I - are both in a minority but that isn't quite it. The significant parallel lies in belonging to a visible minority. If your name is distinctively Jewish, you can always change it and no one will be the wiser; but you can't change your skin color or your gender, at least not easily. When you are a woman breaking a barrier or an African American breaking a barrier, everyone knows because everyone sees. So maybe I do know some of what Barack Obama feels - or at least, I know what he might anticipate in terms of how people will look at him. This leads me to make a few observations based on my personal experience.

Observation #1: Obama will be perceived as making changes even if he does nothing but stand there. Many years ago, my friend Rabbi Deborah Prinz, who was ordained in 1978 two years before me, took a position as assistant rabbi at Central Synagogue in Manhattan. She must have been among the first five or so women ordained. Her senior rabbi, Rabbi Shelley Zimmerman, was ahead of his time both in hiring a woman and in changing the language of the *Gates of Prayer* during services so that God was no longer addressed as "He."

After Debbie had conducted her first service, doing it exactly as Shelley Zimmerman did every week, congregants came up to him and complained: "You hire a woman rabbi, and the first thing she does is change the prayer book." It was no different from what Rabbi Zimmerman did but it looked different.

When I arrived at Temple Sinai in Summit in 1985, I followed Rabbi Morrison Bial who had been there for over 35 years. The congregation had just begun to use *Gates of Prayer* but they were using it the way they had previously used the *Union Prayer Book*. Even though *Gates of Prayer* specified standing for the Amidah, the congregation remained seated as they had when they used the *Union Prayer Book*. I had been told that you shouldn't make changes your first year in a new congregation. But it occurred to me that even if I conducted services exactly the way my predecessor had, it would look different anyway. So I made changes - we stood for the Amidah - and it went large unnoticed because they were so preoccupied with other things that looked different on the bimah, namely, me. So even if Obama did everything just like George Bush, it would look different because he looks different.

Observation #2: It is no surprise that attention has focused on what Barack Obama wears - and what Michelle Obama wears and what the children wear. We know Obama is anti baggy pants that show your underwear because he has said he thinks it is disrespectful; we know Michelle buys at least some of her clothes at J. Crew because, much to J. Crew's delight, she said so on Leno. There are rumors already about clothing trends that the two of them will set without even trying.

Here, if I may be presumptuous, I think that Obama has an easier task than Hillary would have had. I don't think men get inspected quite the way women do, although Obama knows he has to be careful that he doesn't wear anything that would frighten people. You may recall that the Clinton campaign had circulated a 2006 photo of Barack Obama in Somali tribal clothes, intimating that "B. Hussein Obama" is "a secret Muslim". The ad didn't last long.

Hillary herself couldn't win no matter what she wore and so she opted for the comfort of the conservative pantsuit. When you are a pioneering woman in that visual minority club, you opt for conservative. Not long ago, a newly ordained colleague called me to tell me she had a funeral on Long Island on a hot day in August. She wanted to know, "Do I have to wear stockings?" I said, "You are asking the wrong person. My generation of female rabbis all wear stockings, don't wear pants on the bimah, and still wear robes on the pulpit."

You might have heard me tell the story about my interview in 1980 with Buddy Rosenthal, who headed the Search Committee that brought me to Dallas and who visited here back in 2005. I told him that there were congregations where the rabbis no longer wore robes on the pulpit. He said to me, "I can handle hiring a female rabbi but I can't handle having a female rabbi who doesn't wear a robe." I knew exactly what he meant. Even my wearing a robe couldn't disguise my gender - especially when I was 9 months pregnant - but it did help maintain whatever illusion people needed maintained.

In analytic circles, we call this illusion "transference." When people look at a public figure, they transfer onto that person feelings they need to have, feelings that don't necessarily have any relationship to what you might call external reality. This is an unconscious process.

When you look at your doctor in the white coat and expect him or her to be infallible, that's an example of transference. When you see your teacher in the supermarket and you are shocked to discover that she has a real life in which apparently she shops and eats, the problem is that reality has interfered with your transference. Religious leaders evoke transference all the time; you see a white collar on a priest and you feel trust or fear or at least respect. That is why it is unforgivable when clergy - or teachers or doctors or politicians - take advantage of the transference and misuse their office to abuse people who trust them.

Political leaders always evoke transferences in people, both negative transference and positive. The Jewish community had an enormously positive transference to FDR despite the later evidence that he knew about what was happening to Jews in Europe and did nothing to help. Hillary Clinton seemed to evoke both a very strong positive transference and a very strong negative one; people love her or hate her. Depending on to whom you talk, she was Madonna or whore, angel or devil.

I have a sweet memory of one of my first rabbinic experiences of transference. It's a story I may have told you. I had a student pulpit in Pittsburgh in 1978 and was rehearsing on the pulpit with my first bat mitzvah student. She looked up at me part way through the rehearsal and said, "For my bat mitzvah, do you think we could wear matching dresses?" It wasn't that she wanted to be like me, Ellen Lewis; she wanted to be like the rabbi. In that moment, I felt both touched and also aware of the enormity of the responsibility I had assumed in taking on this public role.

It goes without saying that African American children can now have a similar experience when they look at our new President. They will see what they need to see. I think Obama has a talent for evoking a strong positive transference, strong enough to get elected despite seemingly impossible odds. People need to see him as strong and confident in these difficult times and he has a way of allowing them to have those feelings.

And yet he is aware, painfully so, that he as an African American male can evoke a strong negative transference as well. He is painfully aware because he remembers his own late Grandmother Madalyn Dunham who "once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion...uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made [him] cringe." Obama said his grandmother didn't harbor any racial animosity but as a "typical white person" was sometimes afraid when she saw a black stranger. Those kinds of transferences can't be fought but they also can't be ignored; they have to be worked through over time.

Observation #3: It is somewhat obvious that African American children will look at Obama and feel empowered, the way children look at female rabbis and cantors and feel empowered. That was no surprise to me when it happened. But what surprised me when I was first ordained was the other people who felt empowered when they saw a female rabbi - the

people who felt disenfranchised for whatever reason, people who felt marginal in society or in the Jewish community, people who were part of a non-traditional family, people who were intermarried or gay or single or divorced - all seemed to find some identification with me, as if they were thinking: if a woman could become a rabbi, maybe I can find the place where I fit, too.

About 20 years ago when I was in the congregation in Summit, a young man came to see me. His problem was that he desperately wanted to marry his girlfriend but she wasn't sure she believed in marriage or in a Judaism that she saw as distinctly patriarchal. She was a feminist, he told me, and he saw me as his only hope. She might consider getting married if she could be married by a female rabbi, he thought. Turned out he was right. Her perception of me as a female rabbi allowed her to feel comfortable getting married by a rabbi in a synagogue. It was the smallest wedding I've ever done, only 4 people, the two of them and two witnesses.

We have already seen how people around the world have had a similar reaction to Obama: if an African American could be elected president, surely there is hope for America and hope for them. If he can do it, so can they. The comment by Al Qaeda's Number 2 man, Ayman al-Zawahiri - who said Obama's election was "the American people's admission of defeat in Iraq" - actually proves the point. "The election of Barack Obama changes nothing to our enemies," he said. He is trying to counter the worldwide enthusiasm Moslems feel for Obama.

I find hopeful that the Palestinians see in Obama a natural ally; by the same token, I find it discouraging that, for those same reasons, so many Israelis are suspicious of him. When Joe the Plumber said, "A vote for Obama is a vote for the death of Israel," even Fox 5 challenged him - and Fox is no fan of Obama. Shepard Smith said to him, "What I can't figure out is why people agree with you. Joe, do you know Barack Obama's positions on Israel? Barack Obama has said repeatedly time after time that there is nothing more important than the U.S. relationship with Israel; he couldn't have been clearer about it."

All this shows that the flip side of Observation #3 is Observation #4: That as much as some people will look at Obama and feel empowered, others will look at him and feel deprived. Sometimes people are afraid that someone else's gain must mean their loss. Such fear is irrational but it is real and has to be treated that way.

Even in this congregation when I came 15 years ago, there was a past president who resigned because he couldn't accept the idea of a female rabbi. It made him feel like he had lost something. I might not like that but I know it is there. I am sure Cantor Kadin can tell you there are people who hear a female cantor and feel deprived of hearing a male cantor. They are entitled to their feelings. What they are not entitled to is to act out on those feelings or stand in the way of what is good for the larger community.

You all know that change might not feel comfortable initially. You can fight it all you want but you can't stop it. And if you are lucky, after awhile, you can even appreciate it. The people who objected years ago to female rabbis and cantors couldn't have predicted how

rapidly that radical change would become mainstream, how the presence of women in the rabbinate and cantorate would transform not just the rabbinate and the cantorate, but also the experience of worship, the perspective of Torah study and even the words of the new prayer book we will adopt in January.

I hope to go to the [Central Conference of American Rabbis](#) conference in Israel in February where we will install as our President Rabbi Ellen Dreyfus who was ordained a year before me. She will be only the second woman in this position in the last five years. I never would've predicted in 1980 when I was ordained that a woman would become president of the CCAR, just as so many civil rights leaders never thought they would see an African American president in their lifetime.

One final observation: When I was in rabbinical school, a local rabbi came to teach us practical rabbinics. He was probably only 5 or 10 years older than I was at the time. I am sure he wouldn't remember this story at all, but I will never forget it. He was teaching us about what to wear to a funeral. "Wear a dark tie to the cemetery," he said, "but before you go back to the house for shivah, change into a lighter tie." I looked at the other two women in the class and knew they felt the way I did at that moment - invisible. I had to pinch myself to see if I was really there. I wondered why he didn't see me when I was sitting right in the front row.

A lot of people who have felt invisible will now see their reflections mirrored in Barack Obama. They will feel visible for the first time. I am reminded of that famous line from Gloria Steinem when she turned 50. When someone told her she didn't look 50, she said famously, "This is what 50 looks like." There have been many times when people have said to women rabbis, "You don't look like a rabbi," and we would paraphrase Gloria Steinem in response: "This is what a rabbi looks like." And in our time, wherever you look, on the newsstand, on TV or on the internet, Barack Obama is what a president looks like.

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