

Gender Equality on the Bimah

“Do you believe that women should have the same rights as men in synagogue services?”

The question startled me, coming out of the quiet of the hall where I had been seated, reading, waiting for my two sons, ages 10 and 11, who were upstairs studying for their bar mitzvahs. The year was 1971.

I looked up to see who had posed this question. It was the newly-appointed young rabbi who had come over to where I was seated.

Caught off guard, I blurted out, “I was trained just as well as my boyfriends — but when they turned 13 they had bar mitzvahs, while there was nothing, not even confirmation, for me and the few other girls who’d continued on in Hebrew school.”

“Well...” the rabbi persisted (was that a challenging twinkle I saw in his eye?), “do you think it’s time?”

And so...the germ of his question grew into a plan, which blossomed into a proposal to the board of directors of our temple, which culminated at a Sunday morning breakfast-and-conversation open board meeting.

We listened intently as one after another of the men on the board vehemently spoke against the agenda item we’d submitted: “Shall the women of our congregation be accorded the same religious rights as the men — to be called to the bimah, have aliyot, and read from the Torah?”

The discussion grew heated with vociferous antagonism to “breaking an ancient tradition,” “polluting the sanctity of the Torah,” “lowering the high and holy standards set by bar mitzvah training.” “Nothing would ever be the same.” One man warned, “Dire consequences would follow.” Round and round they went. Finally, finally, when the aggravated rhetoric was beginning to repeat itself, a voice was heard over the din. “Call for the question!”

A hush fell over the assembled board. The board chairman rose, cleared his throat, and announced, “All in favor of the question ‘Shall women have the same rights as men to participate in the religious rituals of our congregation?’ — signify by saying ‘aye’ and raising your right hand.”

And then, to the utter amazement of everyone in that room — almost to a man, each board member called “aye” and raised his right hand in assent!

It seemed that members of the board believed they had done their duty, raised all the arguments against, and then embraced the rights of their wives, daughters, and indeed all the congregation’s women, by voting for equality in religious ritual. The room rocked with loud applause!

But suddenly, like the old fairy at the joyous christening of Sleeping Beauty, a small, wizened elderly man stood up and pounded the table for silence. Everyone turned toward him. The room grew quiet. Visibly agitated, the revered gabbi, the religious arbiter of our congregation, announced in a trembling voice, “The morning that a woman comes up to the bimah and reads from the Torah, I will resign from this congregation!” And, with that ultimatum, this oldest member whose definitive voice on ritual and religious rites was often the final word, turned his back on all assembled and left the room.

“Well,” the rabbi continued a few days later “it will all be a hollow victory if no woman steps forward to exercise this newly granted privilege.” And his eyes, like a finger pointing at me, stared challengingly, expectantly.

And so, I agreed, and began my preparation. I met with the cantor, chose a Shabbat morning months hence for my “debut” breakthrough and began to study for, to “learn,” my Torah and haftarah portions.

However, a small, niggling discomfort, after that momentous board meeting, was contaminating my excitement, my eagerness, as I prepared to be the first woman to be called to the bimah, have an aliya, and read from the Torah. I felt a sadness, a visceral curdling, that the old gabbi, the religious backbone of our congregation, was disapproving — might even fulfill his threat to resign, because of me. I decided to reach out to him.

A few weeks before my preparation was complete, as I zoomed in on being “ready,” I attended a Shabbat morning service, and afterwards I approached him. I asked if we could sit down together and talk. “You know where to find me,” he brusquely responded. When I looked puzzled, he replied, “Any Monday or Thursday at morning minyan services.” The very next Monday morning, while my husband and the boys were still asleep, I drove off to the synagogue.

Gathered together at 6:00 am in the small room behind the main sanctuary, the traditional minimum of 10 men (a minyan) met every Monday and Thursday for morning prayers before embarking on their business days. I joined them, chanting the melodies so familiar to me from my childhood.

Prayers over, I approached the gabbi, greeted him with a smile, and asked if we could talk. He stared at me, then sat down and gestured for me to sit on the chair beside him. I began. “I’d like you to know a little about my upbringing, my Hebrew education. My grandfather was a very learned scholar and teacher,” I said. “He sat me, the first grandchild of the family, on his knee when I was a very little girl, and showed me, by tracing with our fingers, Aleph, Bet, Gimmel, Daled — before I even knew my ABCs. “From then on, whenever I visited my grandparents’ home, he would beckon to me and say, ‘kum, tuchter, lernen.’ He never said he was teaching, neither would he use the word lesson. It was always, ‘let’s learn.’ As I look back now on those hours spent with him, I realize that, seated side by side, he wanted me to understand that we were learning together.”

Memories began to flood over me, and my voice grew quiver-y. “I do understand what you are thinking and feeling,” I turned away, not daring to look at him, for my eyes were beginning to fill with tears, “because you remind me so much of my grandpa, and I fear...” (At this moment tears began to run down my cheeks) “I fear that if he were here today, he would probably feel exactly as you do, and be vigorously opposed to my coming up to the bimah and daring to read from the Torah — no matter how hard I am studying to do it well — and despite the fact that he started it all by learning with me.” I covered my face. I was trembling and sobbing.

Suddenly, this little old man, who had been rigidly facing away from me as I spoke, turned towards me and put his arms around my shaking shoulders. He was weeping. “Go,” he said. “Go and do what you need to do. I won’t oppose you — only understand, that I can’t be in the synagogue at that time.” He rose, placed his hands on my shoulders, studied my face, and murmured, “God bless you.” And left. He went his way. I went home — to continue my studying.

The Sabbath morning of my “debut” arrived. Many seats in the temple were filled with people who rarely attended Sabbath services, but who had come this day to bear witness to the first woman being called to the Torah.

The cantor intoned, “Shayna Leah” (my Hebrew name) “Bat Yoel Menachem” (daughter of my father) “Bat Pelta” (and daughter of my mother). I rose from my seat in the sanctuary, and ascended to the bimah.

As I recited the blessings before reading from the Torah, the cantor stepped aside and I sensed a presence to my left. I glanced over, and there, holding the yad (the small, silver hand with the finger extended to point to the place in the holy text), was the gabbai. He nodded to me, bent his head toward the text, and, fulfilling his role, pointed at where I was to begin.

And then...a most amazing sensation came over me. As I began to chant the ancient words, as the trope rolled off my tongue, as the ancestral melodies filled my heart, I had the feeling that it was no longer my voice but the voices of all of our ancestral Torah readers from way, way back in Jewish history who were together with me reading the weekly portion of this most ancient, most cherished, most holy of tomes.