

I worked on this sermon for three days without noticing there were no women.

Let me start at the beginning.

In preparing space for our sanctuary guest, we have begun clearing out some of the closets and moving things around. That gave me the “opportunity” to look at my old boxes of books and papers and to consider whether I still needed all of this material. In truth with so many journals and resources being on line, there were lots of things that were no longer necessary.

Among the boxes of books I was looking at was one with books by or about modern American rabbis. Some were biographies or autobiographies, others collections of their sermons or their reflections on the events of their times.

Some of these were rabbis I knew personally, the two senior rabbis I worked with Rabbi Sam Stahl and Rabbi Z. David Levy. I have the book of one of the rabbis who was with us as a sabbatical fill in Rabbi Erwin Schild, a relative of our former member Gert Jacobs. Some were rabbis I knew peripherally, Herschel Matt, a Conservative rabbi from New Jersey, who was a champion of gay rights in the 1980's, Jack Stern who had been the president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis when I was newly ordained and when that seemed to me a very august position.

It was fun to spend a little time remembering Henry Cohen, who lived a little earlier, in the late 1900's and was the champion of the Galveston Project, which brought Eastern European Jews, sometimes against their will, to Texas, as it was felt there were too many of them in New York. When I was a student rabbi in San Antonio, I met some of the people who worked with Rabbi Cohen, and were very proud of what they had done to help Americanize these immigrants.

Though Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf, has been dead for a decade, I can just imagine what this "bad boy" of the American rabbinate would be saying in response to current events. Very intelligent and learned, he loved to be as provocative as possible. He challenged the Orthodoxies of Classical Reform, as well as those of American Zionism. He was theologically conservative but politically progressive, and befriended a young African American politician from Chicago's South Side back in the 1990's, predicting that someday he would be vice president of the United States. Rereading Rabbi Wolf's advice to congregational rabbis was a reminder of how pugnacious he was on every issue.

I looked at these books, many of which were by and about gedolei hador, the great ones of the generation, mostly the second half of the twentieth century, rereading sections and finding notes I had written to myself, but it wasn't until I was mulling over this sermon for a third day that I noticed that not a single book here was written by or about a woman.

Some of that is about timing. The first woman ordained by a rabbinical school, Sally Preisand, wasn't ordained until 1972. It wasn't until the mid 1980's that women were ordained in any significant number, and not until the 1990's when women began to assume more prestigious positions of leadership.

Timing also has implications for the publication of sermons- now they are much less likely to be issued in books, and instead disseminated in some way over the internet.

Still in the aftermath of the Israeli Rabbinat's blacklist of rabbis worldwide

(<http://www.jta.org/2017/07/09/news-opinion/united-states/here-is-the-chief-rabbinates-blacklist-of-american-rabbis>) I thought about this exclusion. The black list included rabbis from Australia to the Ukraine, including Orthodox, Conservative and Reform rabbis, young and old, prominent and virtually

unknown, and even Rabbi Erwin Schild, who I mentioned as our sabbatical replacement, but not a single woman.

A male leader of the Conservative movement suggested that women rabbis are still like “unicorns” so rare, and self-censor, protecting their converts by not writing letters on their behalf. I know I’ve written letters to help converts establish their Jewish status, so that didn’t ring true to me. More convincing was the explanation offered by a female colleague:

“If they put names of women rabbis on that list, they’d have to acknowledge that women can be rabbis, and I think that’s not a step they’re willing to take publicly,” said Rabbi Rachel Ain of New York City’s Conservative Sutton Place Synagogue. “They’re not willing to put my name on the list because they don’t consider me a legitimate rabbi.”

So why didn’t I notice the absence of women from my box of books? Maybe it was the conditioning of my training, a five year program with all male professors, reading books written by men, and preparing for a profession that was still 95+% men at the time. Maybe the books themselves brought me back to that time, the conferences where my mere presence was cause for

comment, all the more so if I came with a baby and sister-in-law to help in tow.

I'm glad that my bookshelf is much more diverse than this box of books I felt I didn't need to have accessible. In addition to a couple of shelves about women in Judaism, there are also women authors of books on other topics whether that's history or life cycle, pastoral concerns or Biblical commentary. And I hope that we won't be satisfied with lists that exclude half of our community, whatever their purpose.