

Historic retreat marks women's 40 years as rabbis

by erik gleibermann, j. correspondent

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When 27 female rabbis from various streams of Judaism gathered recently for a retreat in the mountains north of Monterey, they recalled the voices and contributions of their forebears.

They spoke of Sally Priesand, who became the Reform movement's first female rabbi when she was ordained in 1972. They spoke of Judith Kaplan, the first bat mitzvah in 1922.

The three days of prayer, ritual and workshops was titled "Forty Years on the Bimah" and it was held Oct. 28-30 at the Mount Madonna Center in Watsonville. Most of the participants were from Northern California, and they covered a wide swath of the Jewish spectrum, making it the first-ever interdenominational gathering of female rabbis, according to chief organizer Rabbi Leah Novick.



Rabbis (from left) D'vorah Rose, a spiritual care coordinator at a San Francisco hospital; Paula Marcus of Temple Beth El in Aptos; and Alicia Magal of the Jewish Community of Sedona in Arizona

Novick, who at 80 is reportedly the oldest female rabbi in the United States, set the tone at the beginning of the retreat by assessing where female rabbis are today.

“So here we are,” said Novick, who lives in Carmel. “We’re the women who walked through the door. We’re the ones who are keeping the garden which they tilled and planted. Now that we’ve been here at least a generation, we are now at the point of looking at who we are, what our work is like and what impact we will have on the next generation.”

According to the event’s website, more than 1,000 women have been ordained in the Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Renewal movements over the past four decades. Currently, more than 70 live or work in the greater Bay Area.

“This was a remarkable and historic gathering of women rabbis of all ages and experience and from all streams of Judaism,” said Rabbi Rosalind Glazer, who traveled from Israel to attend. The spiritual leader at Congregation Beth Israel Judea in San Francisco from 2006 to 2011, Glazer is now a meditation instructor and organic gardener (among other pursuits) at Kibbutz Revadim.

“It was a ‘decades-long dream come real,’ as Rabbi Novick put it, knowing we were both celebrating and making history,” Glazer said.

A major focus of the retreat was on telling one’s own story. During an opening exercise, attendees paired off and shared a first experience: a first Torah reading, a first crisis, a first moment of spiritual awakening.

Rabbi Pam Frydman, who helped found the Jewish Renewal congregation Or Shalom Jewish Community in San Francisco, and served there from 1992 to 2004, talked about how her community once lost three babies in one year. The rabbi she was paired with talked about being in a terrorist attack at age 14 and having to deal with the bodies.

“I found it transformative to hear her and got really close to this woman I hadn’t really known,” Frydman said. “Some of the things I’d heard about her over the years took on a different hue.”

Frydman currently is the director of the Los Angeles–based Holocaust Education Project. She also is the co-founder and international co-chair of Rabbis for Women of the Wall.

The women also wrote a midrash, or story-based commentary, on the week’s Torah portion, which concerned

the expulsion of Hagar from Abraham and Sarah’s home. Rabbi Debbie Israel of Congregation Emeth in Morgan Hill drew parallels between Hagar’s rejection and her own difficulties being recognized as a woman.

“Like Hagar, I was expelled from my spiritual home for most of my life,” she said. “First I discovered there was no place within Orthodoxy for me; then the door to the rabbinate was still closed in other denominations, until it appeared too late. But like Hagar, my eyes were opened just in time and I found my soul’s nourishment in the rabbinate.”

Participants also explored challenges they are facing today. For example, Rabbi Melanie Aron of Congregation Shir Hadash in Los Gatos led a workshop in which the rabbis discussed how they manage (or struggle) to combine things such as motherhood, full-time jobs, relationships and being active in the community.

Toward the end of the weekend, each rabbi received a certificate of honor and participation.

Rabbi Me’irah Illinsky of San Francisco, who is very involved with the Or Shalom community, said the retreat could be a model for interdenominational gatherings of female rabbis in other parts of the country.

“Whenever women gather together to share,” she said, “something profound emerges.”