

## WOMEN READING THE TORAH

For thousands of years, Orthodox Judaism hasn't allowed women to read publicly from the Torah when men are present. But now, things have begun to change.

Historically, only men were required to attend Jewish worship and over time, tradition developed that only men could read publicly from the Torah, or Jewish scripture. Orthodox Jews have held on to this tradition. Kenneth Hain, an Orthodox rabbi at the Congregation Beth Shalom on Long Island, explains.

"It was felt that publicly having women perform would be distracting, would be introducing an immodest aspect to the service."

Last spring Tamara Charm co-founded the first Orthodox prayer group in this country in which women are allowed to read from the Torah alongside men.

"It's harder for me to be in a typical Orthodox service where I feel like the women's section is essentially passive, to connect with the divine when I feel like I am not fully connected in with the community."

150 worshippers meet every 2 weeks in New York City. Most are Orthodox Jews and don't want to leave for Reform or Conservative Judaism, which allow women to read in mixed groups.

Charm says, "To me it's very important to move within the system and do things that are possible within the confines of Jewish law."

But for some, public female readings are not sanctioned. Rabbi Kenneth Hain says, "From the Orthodox standpoint, we are very protective of that tradition and while we may find certain aspects of it at odds with contemporary culture, we are careful not to tamper with it lightly."

Charm first read publicly from the Torah during a service led by Rabbi David Silber, the rabbi who first introduced the practice in the U.S.

"I am also an advocate for tradition, but we have to understand that there is an interplay between tradition on one hand and where we really are. There's a legitimate concern that maybe we are moving too fast in one direction. I don't think we are moving fast at all, frankly."

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