

Orthodox Jews slowly expand roles for women

High Holy Days for Jews in Metro Detroit will start at sundown with Rosh Hashana.

Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, begins at sundown today, beginning the three-week Jewish High Holy Days season.

One of the two most sacred holy days in the Jewish faith, Rosh Hashana is the official start of a 10-day period of repentance by Jews, which ends this year on Sept. 20 with Yom Kippur, known in English as the Day of Atonement.

Following the 10 days of repentance, Sukkot, the Jewish festival of thanksgiving, is celebrated on the final day of harvest. This year,

Sukkot will be Sept. 25 and 26.

Following the seventh day of Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret is celebrated as the concluding festival of the season. Known in English as the Eighth Day of Assembly, it will be Oct. 2.

Simchat Torah, which is English for Rejoicing in the Torah, will be held on Oct. 3, concluding one cycle of Torah reading and beginning a new cycle. The entire Torah will be read during the next year in synagogues, one section each Sabbath.

— Kim Kozlowski



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Yehudis Blumenfeld, 14, is one of a growing number of girls learning sacred texts, formerly taught to boys.

On millennium's eve, is ordination as rabbis far behind?

By Kim Kozlowski
The Detroit News

SOUTHFIELD — For years at the Akiva Hebrew Day School, Orthodox Jewish girls and boys spent their mornings in separate rooms, studying the laws and philosophies of Judaism — with one big difference: Only the boys learned Talmud, the authoritative texts on the faith's traditions.

Today, girls are getting exposure to the sacred Jewish texts, as they are at other Jewish day

schools, reflecting a major change in the education of Orthodox girls.

"If women can be doctors, lawyers and accountants — and good ones — why should we close off a very beautiful and significant part of Jewish learning?" Rabbi Karmi Gross said.

The change is part of a push for more educational opportunities for Orthodox women. As Orthodox women enter their most important season of religious holidays, they are coming to have a deeper understanding of Jewish theory and have risen to become leaders in their spiritual communities.

The call is not only being heard in the United States.

Keeping the faith

Jews, like others, fight waning interest among followers. **Page 1E**
Attacks raise concern: Synagogues step up security around holiday. **Page 4C**

In Israel, several seminaries for Orthodox women have opened recently, and conferences explore their status in the community. Orthodox women in Israel are also participating in study groups and beginning to present cases to religious courts, actions that seemed inconceivable only a few years ago.

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"In Orthodoxy, there have been real changes for women in the opportunities for significant religious experiences," said Pamela Nadell, director of the Jewish Studies Program at American University and author of a book *Women Who Would be Rabbis*. "Where Jewish women were once excluded, they're now asked to be included."

Culture brings change

Orthodox Jews in Metro Detroit are part of a larger community of about 100,000 Jews in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties. In addition to the Orthodox branch, the other major groups are Conservative and Reform.

The Orthodox branch is the most conservative major group in Judaism, while Reform is considered the most liberal branch. Conservative Jews have beliefs and practices that put them between the Orthodox and Reform blocs.

Modesty always has been the hallmark of the Orthodox tradition, so women are expected to cover every part of their body but their face. Hair is typically covered by hats, legs by long skirts and arms by sleeves.

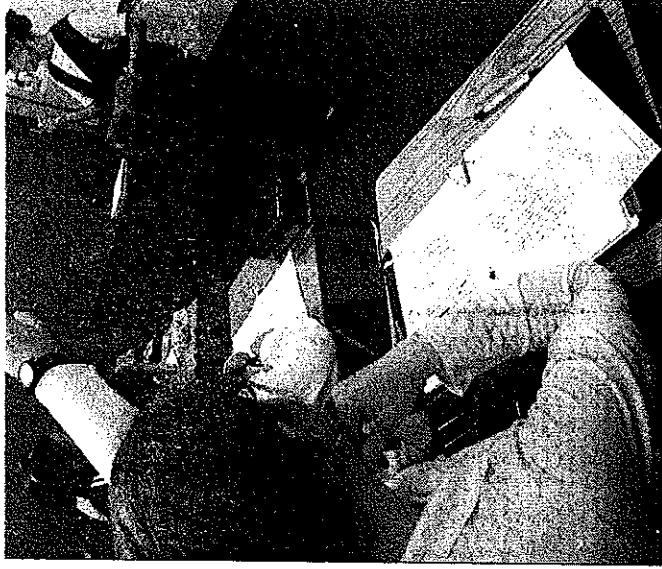
The Orthodox also subscribe to the notion of separate roles for women and men, so women often remain behind curtains in important ceremonies in synagogues. They also are not counted in a *minyan*, the quorum of 10 worshippers needed for public prayer.

But American culture and feminism have brought marked changes to women's roles in the most conservative branch of Judaism, Nadell said. Modern Orthodoxy has begun to expand the education of girls who study in private religious schools. Until the latter part of this century, only boys studied sacred Jewish texts such as the Talmud and the Torah, Judaism's holy book.

"Now girls study the same classic text of Jewish law that in the past only their brothers studied," Nadell said.

Still, the curricula aren't the same rigorous lessons.

At Akiva in Southfield, for instance, boys and girls study Jewish oral law beginning in fourth grade. But beginning in seventh grade, the boys will learn the intense theory behind 10 to 15 pages of the Talmud every year, while girls will



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Until recently, only boys learned Talmud at Akiva Hebrew Day School. Now, girls such as Yehudis Blumenfeld, 14, also are being exposed to the sacred Jewish texts, reflecting a shift in Orthodox Jewish thinking.

learn only passages of the Talmud and the practical applications.

"There's still a substantial gulf between Talmud study for girls and Talmud study for boys," Rabbi Gross said. "Whether that gulf will close is still up for discussion."

Will women be rabbis?

That discussion is going on in Israel and the United States.

Thousand of women gathered in Israel recently for a conference to get the Orthodox establishment to address their roles as women. They're pushing for an expansion of their religious roles, including higher positions in Orthodox institutions.

In the United States, there's an explosion of adult women continuing their Jewish education, a practice that didn't exist 20 years ago. It's happening on a grass-roots level, where women are gathering in synagogues for study and prayer groups. But it's also burgeoning in more formal settings, such as the Drisha Institute in New York.

The institute opened 20 years ago in New York specifically for the advanced Jewish education of women. It started out with a handful of part-time students, but the school has since expanded to offer three

intense, full-time programs leading to certification. Today, the school boasts an enrollment of hundreds of women, although none is from Michigan.

But whether Jewish Orthodox women ever will become rabbis here or in Israel is a question some people are just beginning to ask. If they ever do, it won't come without a struggle. Although the Conservative and Reform branches ordained women rabbis years ago, Orthodox men and women are against it because Jewish law does not allow it.

"Judaism doesn't look at it as men versus women or one of them is better than the other," said Yael Weill, who teaches adult education within Metro Detroit's Orthodox community. "No role is inferior or superior. It's just who's better suited for that role."

But Blu Greenberg, president of the recently-formed Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, believes a Jewish Orthodox woman will become a rabbi during the early part of the new millennium. "Once you open up the access route, you open up the path to ordination," Greenberg said. "Women are beginning to ask the question."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.