

1108  
A

# Washington JEWISH WEEK

7, 5758/January 15, 1998

Candlelighting 4:50, Havdalah 5:54

One Dollar

## Women's work? Jobs in Orthodox shuls spur debate

by Nancy Zuckerbrod  
Staff Writer

**NEW YORK** — The creation of new positions for women in two Orthodox synagogues in New York has elicited praise and excitement, as well as caution and concern, from various segments of the Orthodox community.

Julie Stern Joseph, 24, serves as a "congregational intern" at Lincoln Square Synagogue, where her duties include acting as an intermediary between the rabbi and female congregants when needed, teaching an adult education class, providing pastoral counseling and visiting patients in the hospital.

Nearby, at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, Shorona Margolin Halickman, also 24, performs many of those duties and plans to give sermons on Shabbat from the *bima*, which she says is not on the men's or women's side of the sanctuary but in the middle, on "neutral" ground. It is not common practice in Orthodox synagogues for women to speak from the pulpit during services when men

are present.

### Carving out a role

Orthodoxy does not allow women to be ordained as rabbis, and both Joseph and Halickman say they don't want to break with that tradition. "If there was any notion that this was pushing the boundaries of *Halacha* [Jewish law] or was radical, I would not be involved," says Joseph.

"It wouldn't work," Halickman says of the notion of Orthodox female rabbis. She points out that according to Jewish law, women can't serve as witnesses and can't lead prayers.

Rabbi Avi Weiss, who hired Halickman, agrees there are certain roles women cannot perform according to *Halacha*. But, he notes, there are things women are permitted to do but typically don't do because it is not part of the Orthodox tradition. He says these include teaching Torah, planning holiday programs and acting as decisors (people authorized to make *halachic* decisions) and pleaders.

Weiss says he is looking for-

See DEBATE, page 26

## DEBATE

from 1

ward to carving out a role for women in those areas. "It's a dream come true," he says about hiring a woman. "For me it's part of something much larger. I hope it spreads."

### Educational opportunities

Weiss already has received calls from other Orthodox rabbis interested in the new position and in Torat Miriam, a part-time fellowship program at Weiss' synagogue that prepares women for this type of non-rabbinic leadership role. Halickman is a participant in the program.

Joseph studies at the Drisha Institute, an academy of advanced Torah study for women. Enrollment at Drisha has been steadily rising since the school opened its doors in 1979, says its founder and dean, Rabbi David Silber David. Drisha's courses are of varying lengths and levels of study and take place throughout the year.

Some in the Orthodox community believe women should not study all the texts that men do, but Drisha students do have access to all Jewish texts. That has generated some criticism, but Silber says he doesn't pay much attention to it. "You can't teach by consensus," he explains.

The new internship positions are a natural outgrowth of the Torah education Orthodox women are receiving at places like Drisha and Torat Miriam, says Weiss.

"Now I can really use what

I studied," agrees his student, Halickman, who also earned a master's degree in Jewish studies from Yeshiva University. She says before the new position was created she worried about how she would turn her educational experience

duties Joseph and Halickman have been hired to do.

### Role models

Halickman and Joseph say they hope to serve as role models for Orthodox girls. "Both men and women need to see them-

traditional path.

"We understand the need to maximize women's roles but at the same time we also understand the need to remain within the traditional framework," he says. Mintz calls the creation of the position a milestone because it gives Orthodox women a formal religious role.

Author Blu Greenberg, who writes about women's issues from an Orthodox perspective, describes it as "something between new and revolutionary."

Greenberg is supportive of women's ordination. She seeks to foster dialogue on this subject and other women's issues as the chair of the second International Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy, which is scheduled for Feb. 15 and 16 in New York. Last year more than 1,000 people turned out, and Greenberg estimates there will be at least that many people there this year.

Faskowitz says he will not be one of the attendees. "I don't consider it to be mainstream," he says.

Greenberg acknowledges she has critics, but says "we're marching forward. We're listening to the criticism but not letting ourselves be detoured by someone else's agenda."

Both Joseph and Halickman plan to attend. "In just a year, so much has changed since the last conference," Halickman says excitedly.

Those interested in registering for the conference should call 800-550-6614 by Feb. 1. ■



**WOMEN AT PRAYER** — Orthodox women read from the Torah during a prayer session at last year's International Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy. At this year's conference, to be held Feb. 15 and 16, more than 1,000 women are expected to attend.

File photo

into a profession, because she was not interested in teaching.

Now that Halickman and Joseph are working at their synagogues, Silber says, "You can't really go back. I think from a tactical standpoint, it would be wise for the Orthodox community to welcome these women, give them more opportunities to serve ... and give

Supporters of the internships note it has become hard for some women to perform the traditional role of *rebbeitzin* because they have careers of their own. And Joseph raises the question, "Does that mean you can only have this job if you are married to a rabbi?"

"Yes," responds Rabbi Moshe Faskowitz, chairman of the board of the National Council of Young Israel's Council of Rabbis. He acknowledges seeking a rabbi for a mate is not easy but calls it "noble and worthwhile."

### A step toward ordination?

While Shafran is taking a wait-and-see attitude toward the new positions, Faskowitz flatly opposes them. "It is pushing the boundaries of tradition," he says. "It will only lead to more extreme violations."

"It's no secret it is the agenda amongst many to see a woman rabbi with an Orthodox pulpit," says Faskowitz.

Like his intern Joseph, Rabbi Adam Mintz of Lincoln Square Synagogue denies he is trying to clear the path to the pulpit for women and denies this step will lead to that.

"The slippery slope argument is an old argument," says Mintz, a Washington native. "You have to trust the leadership in anything that they're going to be responsible. And the reason I think within this *shul* — within the modern Orthodox community — this position has been so accepted is because there's a belief that ... we will lead this down the