

# Out and Ordained

*New York's Jewish Theological Seminary graduates its first openly lesbian rabbi.*

*by Amy Stone*



**T**his May, under a great white tent filling the courtyard, the Jewish Theological Seminary, Conservative Judaism's mothership, ordained Rachel Isaacs, the Seminary's first openly gay rabbinical student.

The JTS policy barring gays and lesbians from applying to the rabbinical school became history. No mention was made of this milestone by JTS Chancellor Arnold Eisen or Rabbinical School Dean Daniel Nevins as they addressed graduates, families and friends. The one hint was the psalm Rachel Isaacs chose for her personal notes in the event program: "God is close to the broken-hearted and saves those whose spirits are oppressed."

After a two-decades-long reexamination of Jewish law by Conservative Judaism's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, Isaacs' ordination acknowledges both changing scholarship and societal realities. The tortuous process provides a window into how change happens in a movement that positions itself as the bridge between tradition and modernity.

When Conservative Judaism ordained its first woman rabbi in 1985, the event symbolized an opening of the rabbinic men's club as much as a reinterpretation of halakha (Jewish law). Since then, the face of the Conservative rabbinate has changed. Of the approximately 1,600 Conservative rabbis, fewer than 300 are

women. More than 25 years after that first female ordination, many synagogues still want a male rabbinic leader created in the image of a male God. It seems you can ordain women rabbis, but you can't legislate an end to patriarchy.

So what will the ordination of openly gay and lesbian rabbis mean for Conservative Judaism?

The numbers will undoubtedly be much smaller than the numbers of women rabbis. Rabbinical School Dean Nevins estimated that gay and lesbian Conservative rabbis currently number no more than "a good minyan." The long-term impact may be less charged than the institutional disputes that preceded the acceptance of gay rabbis or the years of fear experienced by closeted students.

The movement's 2006 decision to ordain homosexual rabbis is a model of mixed messages. This rabbinic responsum (*teshuvah*, in Hebrew) starts by reaffirming the biblical ban on anal sex between two men. But that's just the bow-to-tradition opener. Much of the heavily footnoted 20-page decision reads like a sex manual of forbidden holes. Speaking of this ruling that allowed her to become a Conservative rabbi, Rachel Isaacs said, "I blush to read it."

But the driving force in reinterpreting Jewish law is Judaism's overarching concern for human dignity. Most important: the responsum welcomes gay and lesbian Jews to apply to Conservative institutions that train rabbis, cantors and educators. It also permits lesbian and gay commitment ceremonies. This historic responsum, written by Rabbis Elliot Dorff, Daniel Nevins and Avram Reisner, was accepted in a 13-to-12 vote by the 25-member law committee of the Rabbinical Assembly, the professional organization of Conservative rabbis.

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*Shown above, this quotation from Exodus hangs over the entrance to the Jewish Theological Seminary. For the seminary, it signifies the continuity of the Jewish world and its Talmudic tradition—now centered at JTS. Photos by Amy Stone.*

However, true to Conservative Judaism's commitment to both halakha and modernity, the law committee also issued two other conflicting responsa on homosexual rabbis. One, authored by Rabbi Joel Roth, reaffirms the earlier ban on homosexuality; this also passed 13 to 12. A third response, opting for the widely discredited approach of reparative psychotherapy, received six votes; this decision also holds authority. Individual congregations choose which opinion to adopt. So all three contradictory responsa stand as Conservative Judaism's positions on homosexuality—positions that could challenge even the Kama Sutra.

Following the vote, Roth resigned from the law committee, along with three other rabbis opposing gay ordination. (Roth, a respected professor at JTS, declined to be interviewed for this article, saying, "My views on the subject are clear." Ironically, Roth is also the author of the 1983 responsum opening the Conservative rabbinate to women.) Nevins was named head of the JTS Rabbinical School, signaling that the seminary was moving toward ordaining gay rabbis. And Conservative Judaism was not rent asunder.

The Conservative movement's American Jewish University in Los Angeles immediately changed its policy to welcome lesbian and gay rabbinical and cantorial students.

JTS waited three months after the law committee responsum permitting gay ordination. By then, incoming Chancellor Eisen—a sociologist, not a rabbi—had conducted a survey with sociologist Steven M. Cohen finding that the majority of 5,583 responses from rabbis, faculty, students and Conservative leaders favored ordaining gay and lesbian rabbis. In March 2007, JTS changed its policy to admit gay and lesbian rabbinic and cantorial students.

Clearly, Isaacs (see page 15) stands on the shoulders of men and women, gay and straight, who worked to overcome the seminary's deep-seated rejection of gay rabbis.

Back in the early 1990s, Jewish Activist Gays and Lesbians (JAGL) entered the seminary portals to meet with students and faculty. Miryam Kabakov, founder of the group Orthodykes and editor of the 2010 anthology *Keep Your Wives Away From Them: Orthodox Women, Unorthodox Desires*, remembers speaking at that time with both gay and straight rabbinic students.

Following JAGL, Keshet ("rainbow" in Hebrew), under Executive Director Idit Klein, broadened the goal to making not only gays and lesbians but also bisexual and transgender Jews fully part of Jewish life. Klein emphasized, "For every social issue, it's not until people can put a face, a name, a story on it that people's minds start changing."

For many at JTS, that face is Aaron Weinger, the first openly gay rabbinical candidate to enter as a first-year student under the new policy; he's on track to be ordained next year. In his first year at JTS, Weinger chaired the seminary's new Committee on Inclusion, established by the chancellor to determine what's next after the admission of gay rabbinical students. This is a far cry from the days of the Incognito Club, with gay and lesbian students throughout the seminary on suicide watch for each other during the 1991-92 law committee deliberations on homosexuality.

It's still not a totally safe world for gays. The minefield of congregational work blew up under Weinger when he was

*Conservative Judaism's positions on homosexuality could challenge even the Kama Sutra.*

a student rabbi. At the start of his synagogue work this past December, he came out in his opening sermon to the congregation and received a largely enthusiastic reception. Then, in April, he was barred from making his monthly visit. The synagogue president had instituted a policy giving bar and bat mitzvah families the right to keep him away the weekend of their family event, and the family with the April bat mitzvah didn't want him there.

In the mixed-message congregational world, where the majority may welcome a gay rabbi but the minority can institute anti-gay policies, Weinger was invited back for another year but declined, since it was "not a good fit."

While the rabbinical school dean now goes to bat for gay students, this recent rejection was a chilling reminder of the time less than five years ago when admitting to homosexuality meant ouster from the rabbinical school. The last dean enforcing that policy was Rabbi William Lebeau. He headed the school from 1993 to 1999 and again from 2002 to mid-2007, encompassing the periods before and just after the law committee's switch on ordaining gay and lesbian Jews. Some who were forced to lie or leave the rabbinic program say they still remember the fear of being called into Lebeau's office to be grilled on their sexuality. At the same time, Lebeau welcomed JAGL and Keshet into the seminary and credits Keshet with creating "a forum for conversation that prepared the community" for change.

Lebeau is remembered by JAGL's Miryam Kabakov as "deeply caring about the students' welfare." Nevertheless, if someone

outed a student, it was his role to investigate. On his interrogation of one woman days before her ordination, Lebeau said, “I don’t think the student was pushed into an uncomfortable position. I think the student placed the seminary in an uncomfortable position by not revealing anything in her application at a time when JTS clearly stated it did not ordain gays or lesbians.”

Then, suddenly, the war was over.

“The day that the decision was made that gay and lesbian students were to be accepted at the seminary,” Lebeau said, “I sent the message to the student body that we would be open and welcoming. If gay and lesbian students identified themselves, they would be embraced.”

Elliot Dorff, American Jewish University rector, professor of philosophy and current chair of the Rabbinical Assembly law committee, is refreshingly forthright about the untenable past. Before the policy change, he said, gay and lesbian rabbinic

students would confide in him problems stemming from their closeted existence. “I’m the rector of the university, ‘rabbi of the university,’ the chief ordaining officer. I did not want to share the information. The deans did not want to know... I think it was very bizarre and frankly immoral—the irony of the chief ordaining officer ordaining them. Thankfully, that has disappeared.”

Dorff, whose daughter came out to him and her mother as a lesbian after the 1992 decision forbidding homosexual rabbis, says that he “predicted a long time ago that the decision to ordain gay and lesbian rabbis would be less earthshaking than ordaining women.” He explained, “It will take some time for some congregations to get used to this, but we’re not talking anything like the numbers of gays and lesbians compared with women. The response is a whimper, as compared with a roar.”

While the numbers may be small, barring gays from the rabbinate has not just been a case of don’t ask, don’t tell. As Dorff put it, “The rabbinate very much involves your personal life in a way that [being] a doctor or lawyer does not. You don’t want to start out your education for that role by lying about yourself.”

So how will this change play out when openly gay and lesbian rabbis start applying for positions with Conservative congregations?

Chancellor Eisen considers the hiring issues that gay and lesbian rabbis will face as separate but related to the ongoing issue of the glass ceiling keeping women rabbis down. “We can’t

## WHO CAN BE A RABBI TODAY?

**1972** The Reform movement’s Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) ordains Sally Priesand, America’s first seminary-ordained woman rabbi.

**1974** The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) ordains Sandy Eisenberg Sasso as first Reconstructionist woman rabbi.

**1985** The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) ordains Amy Eilberg as first Conservative woman rabbi.

**1985** RRC ordains Deborah Brin as first openly gay rabbi.

**1989** HUC-JIR ordains Eric Weiss, its first openly gay rabbi.

**2010** HUC ordains Reuben Zellman, the first openly transgender rabbi.

**2011** JTS ordains Rachel Isaacs as its first openly gay rabbi. American Jewish University in L.A. ordained its first openly gay rabbi in 2007.

*“There may be less bias toward gay males than straight females.”*

just send our students out to institutions that haven’t thought this through. There are prejudices—some avowed, some unexamined.” Getting at the heart of the matter, Eisen said, “We all recognize that religion is not a rational matter. There are deep psychological images of what is a rabbi—a guy with a beard. Women, on deep levels, confound that.”

As for gay and lesbian rabbis, Eisen said, “There may be less bias toward gay males than straight females. ... If I were merely a sociologist, I’d find this fascinating, but I’m not. I don’t want our students or alumni to suffer.”

In a world where a gender binary has been the norm since Adam and Eve, congregations are now dealing not just with a pregnant rabbi but with the possibility of a pregnant rabbi whose partner is also female. The question of who gets to sit at the rabbinic table has expanded in a relatively short time from men-only to women, to gay and lesbian, to transgender. And the larger question is whether this change will be transformative or whether it simply reveals an increasingly open and honest seating plan—in itself a worthy achievement. ■

*Amy Stone wrote the 1977 Lilith cover story “Gentlemen’s Agreement at the Seminary,” credited with helping overcome the Jewish Theological Seminary’s opposition to ordaining women.*

# Rachel Isaacs

## What a Quiet Revolutionary Looks Like

*Rachel Isaacs knew by the age of 13 she wanted to be a rabbi. Awareness of her sexuality came later.*



Isaacs described her coming-of-age as a lesbian: “I came out to myself around 14. I started the Gay-Straight Alliance in high school (in Freehold, NJ). At Wellesley, being gay was in no way noteworthy.” Openly lesbian, when she was ready for rabbinic school, Conservative Judaism was not ready for her. Isaacs spent two years at Reform Judaism’s Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, and transferred to the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in New York as soon as the school admitted openly gay and lesbian rabbinical students, in 2007.

Although Isaacs feels her ordination “represents a revolutionary moment in Jewish history,” she has no desire to be the Jewish lesbian poster person. Wearing a small black yarmulke and speaking in a resonant voice, Isaacs explained, “I count myself lucky to be born in 1983. I have to pause to think about the wider implications of who I am.” Simply by her gender she’s challenging the patriarchy of Judaism, but, she says, “I probably take that for granted.” She said, “My ultimate goal is to give Jews the resources to perform mitzvahs.”

Described by JTS Chancellor Arnold Eisen as having “cognitive intelligence to burn,” Isaacs seems to seek out a carefully reasoned middle ground. “There are a lot of politics at JTS,” she said, “and then there was my education. I tried to keep that separate as much as the teachers did.” In fact, one of her favorite teachers was Rabbi Joel Roth, the author of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards responsum opposing the ordination of gay rabbis.

Isaacs sees Judaism as “richest when there are ritual and ethical standards that challenge you—kashrut, Shabbat, affirming the centrality of Israel and that it’s a mitzvah to live there.” During her two years with Reform Judaism, she “never got com-

fortable at a synagogue with non-kosher food or HUC’s showing movies on Shabbat.”

The first of the new generation of openly lesbian Conservative rabbis, Isaacs chose as her mentor Rabbi Carie Carter, from the closeted generation of gay rabbinic students. A measure of how much things have changed, Carter felt able to tell Lilith that she is the author of “In Hiding,” the anonymous chapter about lesbian Conservative rabbis in the 2001 book *Lesbian Rabbis: The First Generation*. As Isaacs’ mentor, Carter blessed her and draped the ordination tallit over her shoulders in the presence of the JTS chancellor and ordaining rabbis.

Carter, ordained by the seminary in 1997, was closeted throughout her rabbinic studies. Now an open lesbian rabbi, she leads the Park Slope Jewish Center in Brooklyn, where Isaacs interned.

Not all congregations are ready for gay or lesbian rabbis, or even straight women rabbis. Of the eight women in her class of 26 rabbinical students, Isaacs is one of only three women hired for pulpit positions. She’ll be a half-time rabbi with Beth Israel, a congregation of 25 families in Waterville, Maine, where she served as a rabbinic intern. Unable to afford a full-time rabbi, the congregation wanted her so much that they joined the Conservative movement to make it easier for Isaacs to serve. Isaacs will also be the Jewish chaplain at Colby College in Portland and on the faculty teaching Hebrew and Jewish theology. She is arriving in Waterville with her partner, Melanie Weiss, who holds a master’s degree in Modern Jewish Studies from JTS.

As for Carie Carter’s take on Isaacs’ ordination: “The best part is that Rachel Isaacs, this woman who is a brilliant teacher, chose to be a rabbi, and that she got the opportunity.” ■  
A.S.