



Why I Enrolled in Yeshivat Maharat, the Orthodox Seminary for Women Clergy

BY MARIANNE NOVAK

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A couple of nights ago, my family and I went to see “Finding Dory.” In this charming sequel to “Finding Nemo,” the character of Dory, a blue tang fish plagued with short term memory issues, begins a quest to find her family. Despite her disability, Dory displays incredible grit. In both films, when Dory is faced with adversity, she repeats the mantra, “just keep swimming, just keep swimming.” I have found myself quietly saying this phrase when dealing with particular challenges. It resonates with my personal philosophy of “just keep doing what you’re doing” — especially when you know that very thing that you are doing, albeit groundbreaking or controversial, is important, valuable and necessary for yourself and the community.

It was this attitude that helped me bite the bullet and apply to Yeshivat Maharat, an Orthodox seminary training women clergy. Thankfully, I was accepted and I have successfully finished my first of four years of study. I am always asked what brought me to this decision, to devote my time to receive, God willing, ordination, semikha. In short, I felt it very necessary to have the necessary training and more importantly the proper credentials for the work that I already do.

With that background, I read with some dismay Dr. Erica Brown’s latest piece in the Orthodox Union magazine, Jewish Action. Her portrayal of opportunities for learned Jewish women in the Orthodox community seems quite bleak. By her analysis, initially I thought I just might be completely wasting my time and energy in my studies. But on second thought, her piece simply highlights the VERY reasons why formal training, ordination and titles, whether they be Rabbi, Rabba or Maharat are so very crucial for Orthodox Jewish women and the Orthodox Jewish community at large.

I have some similarities with Dr. Brown, although, admittedly I am nowhere close to being as much of a scholar as she is. I, too, got involved in adult Jewish education as an instructor for the Melton School of Adult Jewish Learning where I have taught for over 17 years (and counting). Additionally, I have been a gabbait (prayer coordinator and Torah reading facilitator) for the Skokie Women’s Tefillah (prayer) Group and have taught and continue to teach girls and boys for bat and bar mitzvah. In these capacities, I was often seen as somewhat of a rabbinic authority and was asked halakhic (Jewish legal) and pastoral questions. While I did my best to answer the questions, for my own integrity and comfort, I had to answer them in a way that did not imply that I was a credentialed authority, because, simply, I was not. Having grown up watching my father, a pulpit rabbi, and given my own extensive Jewish education, I didn’t lack the knowledge or even some of the pastoral skills, but still, it was not enough.

I am privileged to have a number of female friends who are Reform and Conservative rabbis. They are all learned and dynamic leaders. While working with them, I realized that while my skill set was very similar to theirs, I only had a B.A. and a J.D., and it became clear to me that many jobs within the Jewish community would never be open to me, not because of lack of knowledge or skill but because of lack of title and



training. Incidentally, at the time that I was considering applying to Yeshivat Maharat, it was one of these rabbis who sent me an email that simply said, "You should be a Maharat." Before applying to Yeshivat Maharat, I toyed with the idea of getting a Ph.D. in Jewish Studies as Dr. Brown and many other Orthodox Jewish women have done and continue to do. My father, who now holds the Schiff Chair of Jewish Studies at the University of Toronto began to help me in that endeavor. However, when I mentioned applying to Yeshivat Maharat, he was convinced it would be a better fit for me. He told me, "You are already functioning basically as a rabbi already. This is the best thing I've heard all year. Now you'll have semikha to back it up."

My colleagues from Yeshivat Maharat who are ordained ARE working, public clergy figures in Orthodox synagogues in the United States and Canada. Additionally, some are working in Jewish communal positions that would not been open to them without a rabbinic title. No one has to guess what to call them

because they all have titles, albeit different ones, that signify rabbinic ordination and pastoral training. They are making a difference in their communities in significant, public ways. They are inspiring communities and by just doing their work, they are changing the perceived paradigm for Jewish women's spiritual leadership within Orthodoxy. While I am not so naive to think that there is not still a lot of work to be done, the future is bright and is happening right now. Perhaps Erica Brown's depressing view stems from her interaction with the OU itself. As my friend and colleague, Dr. Malka Simcovich noted in a recent Facebook post, "The OU is an organization that will not advocate for formal change in women's leadership roles, and in this context, the future is bleak indeed."

I am exceedingly hopeful for my job prospects, whatever they may be, after my four years of study. I know it won't be easy and challenges will remain, but until then I will just keep swimming, just keep swimming...

