

JEWISH WOMEN CALL FOR CHANGE  
*Manifesto presented to the Rabbinical Assembly of the  
Conservative Movement on March 14, 1972*

The Jewish tradition regarding women, once far ahead of other cultures, has now fallen disgracefully behind in failing to come to terms with developments of the past century.

Accepting the age-old concept of role differentiation on the basis of sex, Judaism saw woman's role as that of wife, mother, and home-maker. Her ritual obligations were domestic and familial: nerot (candles), challah, and taharat ha-mishpachah (family purity, i.e. laws of mikveh and sexual purity). Although the woman was extolled for her domestic achievements, and respected as the foundation of the Jewish family, she was never permitted an active role in the synagogue, court, or house of study. These limitations on the life-patterns open to women, appropriate or even progressive for the rabbinic and medieval periods, are entirely unacceptable to us today.

The social position and self-image of women have changed radically in recent years. It is now universally accepted that women are equal to men in intellectual capacity, leadership ability and spiritual depth. The Conservative movement has tacitly acknowledged this fact by demanding that their female children be educated alongside the males—up to the level of rabbinical school. To educate women and deny them the opportunity to act from this knowledge is an affront to their intelligence, talents and integrity.

As products of Conservative congregations, religious schools, Ramah camps, LTF, USY, and the Seminary, we feel this tension acutely. We are deeply committed to Judaism, but cannot find adequate expression for our total needs and concerns in existing women's social and charitable organizations, such as Sisterhood, Hadassah, etc. Furthermore, the single woman—a new reality in Jewish life—is almost totally excluded from the organized Jewish community, which views women solely as daughters, wives, and mothers. The educational institutions of the Conservative movement have helped women recognize their intellectual, social and spiritual potential. If the movement then denies women opportunities to demonstrate these capacities as adults, it will force them to turn from the synagogue, and to find fulfillment elsewhere.

It is not enough to say that Judaism views women as separate but equal, nor to point to Judaism's past superiority over other cultures in its treatment of women. We've had enough of apologetics: enough of Bruria, Dvora, and Esther; enough of Eshet Chayil (the woman of valor)!

It is time that: Women be granted membership in synagogues; Women be counted in the minyan; Women be allowed full participation in religious observances—(aliyot, ba'a lot kriyah, shlichot tzibur) (being called to the Torah, reading torah, leading services); Women be recognized as witnesses before Jewish law; Women be allowed to initiate divorce; Women be permitted and encouraged to attend Rabbinical and Cantorial Schools, and to perform Rabbinical and Cantorial functions in synagogues; Women be encouraged to join decision-making bodies, and to assume professional leadership roles, in synagogues and in the general Jewish community; Women be considered as bound to fulfill all mitzvot equally with men.

For three thousand years, one-half of the Jewish people have been excluded from full participation in Jewish communal life. We call for an end to the second-class status of women in Jewish life.

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Editor's note (from the Jewish Women's Archive): Denied their request to address the Rabbinical Assembly, Ezrat Nashim had the manifesto included in the packets distributed to the rabbis, and invited those rabbis' wives to a special meeting on March 14. The "call" was well-received at the convention, but the Conservative movement did not act immediately. When the Jewish Theological Seminary finally voted to admit women to the rabbinical school, in 1983, Ezrat Nashim members celebrated the decision for recognizing "the compelling moral claim of women's equality as well as the changed status of women in the modern world."