

# HAARETZ

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## What stops Jewish mothers from leading by example at shul?

Some mothers who wish to provide their daughters with leadership opportunities in Jewish life shy away from taking these opportunities themselves. Why?

By Nora Gold / Jewish World blogger | Sep. 22, 2014 | 2:32 PM | 1



Dr. Noga Gulst at a synagogue that serves the Reform community in Sha'ar Hanegev, Israel.

As the High Holy Days approach and I start preparing, as I do every year, to lead *Shaharit* (the morning service) on Rosh Hashanah, I find myself reflecting on how far women have - and haven't - come in the role of prayer leaders since I began doing this 25 years ago. Back then, at my egalitarian shul (not associated with any particular stream of Judaism), there was only a handful of women leading prayers either on High Holy Days or throughout the year, and most of the time one saw only men on the bima.

Thankfully, much has changed since then. Jewish feminists, together with both male and female allies, have revolutionized synagogue life. At two of the Reform movement's largest North American synagogues, the senior rabbis are **women**, and, even more remarkable, Orthodox women, since 2009,

are now being ordained as rabbis ("maharat"s) - something that, even one year before, had been unthinkable.

These expanded opportunities for women in religious leadership roles in the different streams of Judaism are tremendous. Yet I'm not sure, when it comes to egalitarian congregations, that such opportunities have necessarily resulted in changed behavior among the average female shul member. There is certainly much more of a female presence on the bima now than 25 years ago, but there still seems to be a relatively small cadre of women performing these roles. Why might this be?

One part of the answer may lie in a research study that I conducted 20 years ago, called "Ima's Not on the Bima" (the title adapted from a children's book called *Ima's on the Bima*). I initiated this because I was puzzled by something. There was a phenomenon of women who left their non-egalitarian shuls and joined egalitarian ones in order to give their pre-bat mitzvah-aged daughters more opportunities to lead services, and these mothers all said they supported egalitarianism in Judaism, and, in most cases, feminism too. Yet, none of them were willing to even try leading services themselves.

I interviewed 30 such women who belonged to three different shuls, and the results were fascinating. The main finding was that what

prevented these women from leading services were psychological barriers. For instance, some women grew up believing the bima was a place only for men, and this unconscious childhood belief had remained intact into adulthood, co-existing (unexamined) alongside the commitment to feminism. The sexism embedded in their early socialization to Judaism still dominated their synagogue behavior. For example, one woman who had been on the bima only once in her life said, “I thought that day I’d be struck down by lightning. I thought I was being watched from the sky by my childhood rabbi.”

So, despite these women’s best efforts to give their daughters access to a more active and expanded Jewish experience than they had had, many of them ended up giving their daughters a double message about prayer leadership: “It’s too hard for me to do, but you go ahead and do it. Emulate the women on the bima, not me.” In essence, they became role models of ambivalence for their daughters. And since, as we know, children do not what their parents say, but what their parents do, this ambivalence significantly affected their daughters’ feelings about prayer leadership and their willingness to engage with it.

Fast-forward 20 years, and I still see evidence of this same pattern. True, nowadays, Jewish feminist role models gloriously abound. There are women rabbis and cantors in most major cities, and they inspire young women aspiring to these careers, as well as some other young women in their congregations. Even so, it seems like the jury’s still out as to whether or not the next generation of young women in egalitarian congregations will step up to the plate and lead prayer services.



Leading the *davening* (praying) on Rosh Hashanah is not only an honor; it is a unique joy and delight. Being a woman, I am always aware of this as a privilege, a gift, something that my grandmothers never had the opportunity to experience. I've been involved in numerous leadership roles in my life, but leading my own community in prayer is a very special religious and spiritual experience, hard to compare to any other.

I would love to see more women having this experience. This Rosh Hashanah, when on the bima leading *Shaharit*, I'll send up a silent prayer that, in the coming year, more young Jewish women will take advantage of this amazing opportunity that is available to them. An opportunity that, when I was their age, was nothing more than a distant dream.

*Dr. Nora Gold's acclaimed [Fields of Exile](#), the first novel about anti-Zionism on campus, was published this spring. Gold is the editor of [Jewish Fiction .net](#), the Writer-in-Residence and an Associate Scholar at the Centre for Women's Studies in Education, OISE/University of Toronto, and a board member of the [Dafna Fund](#).  
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