What Is Possible: Striving for Gender Pay Equity for Congregational Employees

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Introduction

Our tradition differentiates between *olam hazeh* and *olam haba*, this world and the world-to-come. This world seems obvious—the living, breathing, messy lives we inhabit. The world-to-come—generations upon generations of Jewish scholars and thinkers have postulated what that world-to-come will be: resurrection, a return to the land of Israel, the messianic era.

Parker Palmer, scholar, thinker, teacher, and activist, developed a similar binary to describe the world—the binary of the hard realities and what we know is possible. More important is his conception that we must live in the “tragic gap” between reality and the possibility to make changes.¹

It is in this gap that we exist today concerning pay equity in our Reform Movement. We know achieving fair and equitable pay for our male and female professional employees is possible. Although the overall numbers from the 2016–2017 CCAR salary study show that there is indeed a pay gap between male and female rabbis, there are pockets of equity. For example, female senior rabbis of the URJ’s largest congregations (over 800 households) are paid just over 95 percent of what their male colleagues make.²

And yet, the reality for the vast majority of our male and female Jewish professionals and clergy is different. Female rabbis

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in senior or solo positions in congregations with fewer than 600 households make about 90 percent of what their male colleagues are paid. Starting salaries for newly ordained rabbis in assistant positions are more equitable between men and women. By the time a woman is an associate rabbi, the salary difference can range between 82 percent and 103 percent.

Similar data exists for women in other synagogue positions—cantors, executive directors, and educators. In examining data from the National Association for Temple Administrators (NATA), their salary survey shows that, overall, female executive directors and temple administrators earn 82 percent of the average salary of males. And yet, the survey also showed progress, part of what Palmer referred to as the “what we know is possible.” The data shows less of a gap for newer hires compared to tenured executive directors. Female directors with less than three years at their current congregation earned 102 percent of their male counterparts. In addition, females with an MBA or other master’s degree showed the smallest gender gap in pay.

Let us return for a moment to Palmer’s tragic gap—to living in the space between what we know is possible and where things are. Palmer encourages all of us to live in that gap and not to choose a side—either the cold hard facts of reality that leads us down the road to corrosive cynicism or the world of “wouldn’t it be nice if,” which he refers to as irrelevant idealism. Many of our congregations are financially strained. When we speak to our congregational leaders and we ask about challenges, budget constraints are often at the top of the list. We cannot ignore that real challenge. Yet, congregations are built with the mission of fixing our broken world, including the broken parts in our own system, and modeling just practices. Therefore, we need to wrestle with the challenge that running a congregation is costly, while at the same time recognizing we should not declare “we can’t afford it” when the wage gap is unfair and unjust. We need the courage and patience to really wrestle with this challenge. Part of the world that needs to be repaired is our own internal congregational world.

Before we address the best practices to help achieve pay equity in congregational life, let us first address a necessary ingredient to the successful foundation of all congregations: sacred partnership.
Sacred Partnerships

At the URJ, we spend an incredible amount of time speaking about the sacred partnership between professional staff and lay leaders. It is the very foundation by which our congregations achieve their mission and purpose. There is almost nothing our congregations can achieve without recognizing how valuable this partnership and connection is. Some of our congregations do this extremely well and some are still challenged by this concept.

In a congregation with a healthy degree of sacred partnership, contract negotiations are more likely to be defined by trust, open dialogue, and a desire to make each partner feel good about the end result. These are the congregations that have a deep understanding of the b’rit, the covenant, between the congregation and its clergy and professional staff. They understand that this is much more than an employee contract. In the clergy and staff, they see the individual who buried their parent, who held them when their child was sick, who prepared their child for a bat mitzvah, or who introduced Jewish summer camp to their kids. And for the clergy and professional staff, they don’t necessarily see the board as an employer but as partners in a sacred relationship, as a group of people who strive to build the kind of institution that brings compassion, justice, and wholeness to the world.

Unfortunately, there are some congregations that see the position of rabbi or cantor, or any other staff, as just a job that needs filling. There is no sense of covenant or trust. The worst practices from the business world, particularly as it relates to employment, are borrowed. Comments such as “if the rabbi doesn’t do what we want him or her to do, then we can always get another rabbi,” are heard. Thankfully, the vast majority of our congregations are unlike this. However, it is important to recognize that we will not be able to close the gap on pay equity in our congregations if we don’t recognize the sacred partnerships that make our congregations unique places of employment.

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What can we do in congregations to get closer to pay equity? There are a number of best principles and concrete steps that can be taken. Let us begin with the principle of transparency.
Transparency

Transparency is important for everyone who has a stake in reaching pay equity in our Reform Movement, both for congregational leaders who make hiring decisions and clergy and other professionals who work in our institutions. Something is transparent when it is easy to perceive or detect. Key to success is transparency around salary and accompanying benefits.

When a congregation advertises a position for a cantor, rabbi, educator, or other professional staff, it is important that from the moment the job is posted, a specific salary amount and benefits are included. Words like “competitive” or “commensurate with experience” are not helpful. If we want to try to end the pay inequity in our movement, it is important that candidates know the starting salary for the position. One central reason this is important is that it prevents the candidate from having to ask early on in the interview process, which for women is harder and comes across as more aggressive than when a man asks. In addition, leaders in the field of pay equity, such as the National Women’s Law Center, have argued that if negotiating for salary and benefits is acceptable, employers should make that explicit in the job description and/or at the point of a job offer. This will both increase the likelihood that a woman will negotiate and will also reduce the stigma often placed on women for engaging in such behavior.6

It is also important that synagogue professionals get to a place of trust and transparency with one another where they can share with each other what they make, in confidence. When a female candidate is trying to figure out what the standard salary should be for a particular position in a particular size congregation, it is critically important that she learn what her male colleagues are making, not just her female colleagues. If she only learns what her female colleagues are making, she may have a depressed baseline, as we know that women, on average, make less than their male counterparts.

As part of the effort at transparency, it is important that each of the respective professional associations continue to provide timely salary studies or surveys, and that these be shared equally with congregational leaders and professionals. Crucial to these studies and surveys is being able to see the difference in pay scales for men and women in different size congregations.
Implicit Bias Awareness

All of us have implicit bias. How do we define it? The following definition is taken from The Perception Institute:

Thoughts and feelings are “implicit” if we are unaware of them or mistaken about their nature. We have a bias when, rather than being neutral, we have a preference for (or aversion to) a person or group of people. Thus, we use the term “implicit bias” to describe when we have attitudes towards people or associate stereotypes with them without our conscious knowledge.

Many of us, irrespective of our gender, have implicit gender bias. Having a female chair of the search committee or having women on the committee does not end implicit gender bias against women. It is crucial that the individuals who are involved in hiring professionals in our congregations and movement institutions receive implicit bias training.

The challenge with implicit bias is that it is NOT explicit. Bias is not the same as misogyny or racism. Implicit bias training helps us to become more aware of the stereotypes and prejudices we all have, even though we may not be aware of them.

Project Implicit, out of Harvard, offers implicit bias tests around many categories, including Gender-Career. We invite everyone, search committees and candidates themselves, to take the ten-minute test and engage in some self-reflection on the results. It is important to note that the results do not label individuals as bad people, rather they help identify how our actions may be affected by societally held biases.

One of the suggested strategies to erase implicit gender bias in the workplace is to remove the name and identifying gender markers from resumes. This has not yet been attempted through our respective professional associations such as the CCAR, CCAR, NATA, ECE-RJ, or ARJE, although it has been suggested. This would allow search committees to judge resumes based on experience and ensure that callbacks are not influenced by a gender lens. Another option might be to have search committees commit to looking at a certain number of candidates from each gender. Although congregations cannot control who applies for the job, they can control how many women they choose to interview,
both during first rounds and callbacks, based on who submits resumes.

Negotiations

According to the National Women’s Law Center:

Using negotiation to set compensation can lead to gender wage gaps. Women are less likely to negotiate their salaries than men, and in many instances, that may be for good reason. Indeed, studies show that employers react more favorably to men who negotiate salaries, while women who negotiate may be perceived negatively and penalized for violating gender stereotypes.11

In an excerpt from her book Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead, Sheryl Sandberg writes on the different ways men and women are perceived when they negotiate:

There is little downside when men negotiate for themselves. People expect men to advocate on their own behalf, point out their contributions, and be recognized and rewarded for them. For men, there is truly no harm in asking. But since women are expected to be concerned with others, when they advocate for themselves or point to their own value, both men and women react unfavorably. Interestingly, women can negotiate as well as or even more successfully than men when negotiating for others . . . because in these cases, their advocacy does not make them appear self-serving. However, when a woman negotiates on her own behalf, she violates the perceived gender norm.12

This plays out constantly in our congregational environment. A number of female clergy have shared that when they tried negotiating for salary or benefits, they were viewed as “aggressive and greedy” or “unladylike.”13 Women have been told they don’t need to be paid as much nor do they need health insurance since their husbands work. Some have been told “it’s unbecoming of you to ask.” If women in general violate the gender norm by negotiating, women clergy do so in particular, as clergy are viewed as serving, selfless beings.

Research has shown that when women do choose to negotiate, they need to negotiate differently than men.14 It is critical that we provide negotiation training for our female clergy and
professionals, either through HUC-JIR or through our respective professional organizations. At the 2017 URJ Biennial in Boston, the Reform Pay Equity Initiative (RPEI), led by Women of Reform Judaism and the Women’s Rabbinic Network, sponsored a workshop on negotiation skills for women that was very well attended. There is a critical need for this type of continuing education. One workshop will not be enough.

As stated earlier, it could have an impact on how women are perceived in congregations if negotiating was explicitly encouraged. If the terms of employment, both salaries and benefits, were viewed by the search committee as an opening offer, then perhaps women won’t be viewed so negatively when they do ask for more.

Paid Family Leave

We could have called this section maternity leave, but that language creates a false narrative about the reality of life. Family leave acknowledges that at some point in our working years, each of us will likely need to take some protected time off to care for a child, a dying parent, or an ill spouse, irrespective of our gender. Paid family leave is built on the notion that none of us should have to risk our jobs or lose money to do that.

We must stop seeing paid family leave as a luxury or benefit that only women need. As a movement, we must push our society to a place where this is a nonnegotiable, dare we say a right, that every working member of society should have.

In the Ten Commandments, the fifth commandment is “honor your father and your mother.” What kind of honor do we give to parents when we require them to negotiate for time off to take care of the most vulnerable: babies, the sick, and the dying? It is a Jewish value to care for our parents and children.

We realize that expecting every congregation and institution in our movement to change its policy immediately will be a little like waiting for olam haba (the world-to-come). In the meantime, we would like to suggest the following strategies that will help.

If it becomes standard for every male professional in our congregations to ask for paid family leave, even if they don’t anticipate using it, then it will be more likely that this will become a norm across the Reform Movement. Remember that when men negotiate, they are not penalized the way women often are, and they are
often granted their request. In addition, when a male professional has successfully asked for paid family leave and then leaves the position, he has paved the way for a female professional who succeeds him to gain the same benefit without having to ask for it. Clearly, each individual has to assess the situation for himself and each situation is unique. We encourage our male professionals to ask themselves if this is something they can do in their next contract or annual review.

Some senior rabbis, particularly senior male clergy, are well-positioned to advocate for paid family leave for the employees they supervise. In those situations where the senior rabbi has the relationships, the trust, and the clout with the board, he or she can be quite successful in advocating for fair compensation packages for female employees, with a particular focus on equity in the field.

It must be stated that it is impossible to discuss the issue of paid family leave without acknowledging the gap between what we provide for our senior professional staff and what we offer our administrative and support staff. We will not have achieved full pay equity until such a time as our congregations and movement institutions live up to the standard that we have argued for in the greater society. In 2015, the URJ passed a Resolution in Support of Paid Family Leave, stating that “the Union for Reform Judaism . . . urges our congregations and all arms of the Reform Movement to provide, to the extent feasible, paid family and medical leave for their employees, and set an example for their communities.” Indeed the URJ’s own policy is to offer up to eight weeks of paid family leave for its full-time employees in the United States, plus an additional 4.6 weeks of paid sick leave, thus satisfying family advocacy groups and the CCAR’s recommendation of a minimum of 12 weeks paid leave.

Motherhood Penalty

One of the key challenges that affects the wage gap in society in general is what is known as the “motherhood penalty.” This term has become such a known entity that it has its own Wikipedia entry. It is a term coined by sociologists to name the phenomenon that working mothers are paid less than working fathers, as well as less than working non-mothers. The American Association of University Women (AAUW) states that it typically takes working mothers five extra months to be paid what working fathers are paid in just one year.
This doesn’t just impact mothers in the private and public sector, but in our congregations as well. When female staff members raise the subject of family leave, especially when negotiating a first contract, eyebrows get raised and comments such as “is there something you aren’t telling us?” or “are you planning on getting pregnant” are often heard across the table. Congregations are concerned when hiring female clergy or professionals that they will take time off to have kids—a question that rarely is raised when men are being considered.

According to a recent *New York Times* article, entitled “Children Hurt Women’s Earnings, but Not Men’s (Even in Scandinavia),” changes in the behavior of fathers is key to having an impact:

There is evidence that the gap would shrink if fathers acted more the way mothers do after having children, by spending more time on parenting and the related responsibilities. “At the very least, men have to take a larger role,” said Francine Blau, an economist at Cornell who has studied the gender pay gap and family-friendly policies in the United States and Europe. “It does become a distinction in the eyes of employers between potential male and female workers, and it may reinforce traditional gender roles.” . . .

“If you know that both men and women will go off and take care of children, not just women, what that does is remove the motherhood penalty,” said Heejung Chung, a sociologist at the University of Kent.  

### Some Remaining Dos and Don’ts

Lastly, we wanted to provide you some final helpful tips, particularly for congregations beginning to think about their next hire.

There are a number of questions to avoid when interviewing candidates, particularly as they contradict recommended hiring procedures of the Reform Movement. Types of questions to avoid include asking about the candidate’s age, family makeup and family plans, whether the candidate is pregnant, what the spouse does for a living, as well as salary history.

Why is asking about salary history particularly challenging? Given that most women applying for new jobs are already at a salary disadvantage as compared to male candidates, learning their salary history generally only perpetuates the pay inequity between...
men and women. Congregations should not set the salary for jobs based on what the person earned previously.

In addition, asking a job candidate about her previous earnings has recently become illegal to ask in a number of states and cities across the United States. In April 2018, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit declared it illegal to pay a woman less than a man based on her prior salary.21 It is important we note, however, that most religious institutions, including URJ congregations, are exempt from such labor laws. Yet, our stance as a movement compels us to engage in the best practices that will further reduce the gender gap in pay in our Reform institutions.

Don’t offer a higher salary at the expense of offering paid family leave. Neither should family leave be used as an excuse to lower a woman’s pay compared to a male colleague, or anyone’s salary.

Don’t begin by deciding if you want to hire a man or a woman. Decide upon the qualities you want. In addition, don’t assume a woman will be good with families because she is assumed to be more maternal, or that a man will be a better visionary or scholar. Stereotypes, as implicit bias tests show, are hard to shake.

**Final Thoughts**

It is not all bad news. The data from the 2016–2017 CCAR salary study shows that for some categories the pay gap between men and women has improved slightly since the last salary study in 2012. Similar results are evident in the NATA salary survey. We as a movement have made strides in this arena. It is now time to commit ourselves even more to addressing this challenge.

And let us remember what the Mishnah comes to teach: *Lo alecha hamelacha ligmor v’lo atah ben chorin l’hibatel mimena* (“it is not incumbent upon us to complete the work, but neither are we free to desist from it”).22 Let us continue to live in the tragic gap between the hard reality of the world and what we know is possible. We likely will not reach *olam haba* anytime soon but that doesn’t mean we can’t try to create a more equitable, fair, and just situation for the clergy and professionals of our congregations.

**Notes**

3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
12. Taken from individual correspondence with female clergy via e-mail and private conversations.
13. For more information on the unique challenges women face when negotiating, please see Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever, Women Don’t Ask: The High Cost of Avoiding Negotiation—and Positive Strategies for Change (New York: Bantam Dell, 2007).
18. These comments come from the personal experiences of one of the authors as well as comments made by female clergy in private conversations.