Where Do We Go from Here? Achieving Pay Equity on Our Pulpits

Richard Jacobs

Thank you to my rabbinic colleagues Rabbi Marla J. Feldman and Rabbi Mary L. Zamore for taking the lead on this critical issue and for editing what will surely become a useful and much-tapped resource for all of us who strive to live our most essential Jewish values. I commend the Women’s Rabbinic Network and Women of Reform Judaism for leading us on this critical journey to ensure that we practice equity across our movement.

As rabbis—whether pulpit rabbis or not—we are invested in considering, every day, how our words match our deeds. As teachers and exemplars of Judaism, we must consider our deeds as guides for how to live a righteous life—not only for ourselves personally, but for others as well.

Our words are not regulated by our gender, but rather by the dictates within scripture: to seek justice—not only for some, and not only for one sex over the other. Indeed, we must seek justice for all.

This imperative presents a serious challenge for women rabbis and cantors, who face a pay gap and other workplace inequities. What’s more, the wage gap isn’t a problem only for our clergy; our professional staff also suffer in this regard.

We have struggled with this issue for a long time. The UAHC (predecessor to the URJ) first passed a resolution for pay equity in 1983, resolving to “examine its practices and call upon the UAHC and individual congregations to eliminate any sex discrimination and apply the principle of economic equity for all.” We reiterated this request for pay equity in a 1992 resolution that laid out a four-point plan for success. In 2008, the URJ once again stated its goal...
of full equity by adopting a resolution calling for congregations and all parts of the Reform Movement to create workplace environments that promote a culture of support and respect and to develop employment policies that ensure fair and equitable treatment for all employees.

We know the problem. We have commissioned studies that have given us endless graphs and charts—and we have the human stories, too. We know that acknowledging the problem is not enough, illustrating it is not enough, and even protesting about it is not enough. The time has come for us to move forward together. The contributions found in the pages of this Journal are a terrific and important guide to help us make the necessary change happen.

We understand, of course, that congregations have financial challenges, and I want to underscore the difficulty that some congregations may have in ensuring that salaries are commensurate with worth. Nonetheless, we need to take the moral high ground.

The articles in this volume are guideposts for congregations, intended to help them traverse the trouble spots and design solutions that demonstrate the moral high ground, even in the face of tough financial constraints. The article by Amy Asin, vice president for Strengthening Congregations at the URJ, and Rabbi Esther Lederman, the URJ’s director of Congregational Innovation, considers various ways congregations can make moral and financial ends meet. In his article, Rabbi Paul Kipnes, the spiritual leader of Congregation Or Ami in Calabasas, California, lays out a thoughtful analysis about the return on value congregations will receive by doing the right thing.

Simply put, the Reform Movement has not lived up to its values, and it’s time for our institutions to align with those values. However, this challenge cannot be relegated to women to fight for women; it is not solely the role of women rabbis, cantors, administrators, and educators to fight for themselves. Men can be allies and as husbands, parents, friends, and brothers, we must be allies. Together, we all need to make certain that our congregations are family-friendly bastions of equality and excellence. Additionally, we must ensure that our battei Knesset (our houses of worship), are houses of sanctity from top to bottom, and that the people who teach us, who teach our children, and who watch over us in our life-cycle events also (and always) are treated equitably and equally.
Pay equity is about much more than wages or a paycheck, as several writers in this collection point out. Women who take time off to raise children, who enter the workforce after nurturing children, and who traditionally are not accepted as strong negotiators all affect pay equity. As a result, congregations’ desire to do well by women means that they must not only look at women as peers to men for jobs, but also as individuals who are expected—still—to shoulder more of the family work in our society—regardless of changing norms or professed expectations.

We need to erase the “motherhood penalty.” That’s the correct path. But we also need to encourage a change in parenting patterns so that fathers are as engaged in parenting as are mothers. When feasible, we need to encourage single- and two-parent families to see both parents as active partners in family life. In 2018, there is absolutely no reason clergy should have to be absentee parents or family members because of too much work in our congregations. No one should be penalized for wanting to nurture children or be full participants in meaningful ways with their immediate and extended families.

Therefore, when considering pay equity, it is important to take a holistic view. Perhaps designing a benefit package for a female clergy member will prompt congregations to consider giving male clergy time off to join in childcare responsibilities. Consider the value—to any parent—of not missing out on a baby’s first words, a parent-child baseball game, even a school trip. What price do parents pay for pulpit work?

Together, let’s look at how to make our houses of worship family-friendly and people-friendly, places where work is neither a burden nor an oppressive necessity, but rather the joyful experience that religious life should be for all who teach and lead others in celebrating Jewish life.

As we seek to create a world of wholeness, compassion, and justice, what does it mean to create synagogues that actualize that vision? Even when congregations’ mission statements espouse love and compassion, we know that frequently budgets’ bottom lines, job descriptions, and expectations tell a different story. If we truly want our congregations to be sacred communities in which we experiment, model best principles, and engage every individual at the highest level of human dignity, now is the time. Let’s get this done.
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