Shattering the stained glass ceiling

Hara Person talks about her appointment as the first woman chief executive of the Central Conference of American Rabbis

By Shaked Karabelnicoff

LESS THAN 50 years ago, Reform Judaism turned heads with the controversial and groundbreaking milestone of ordaining the first female rabbi in America. Since then, Reform leaders say women have been trailblazing the Jewish world. Through their scholarship, leadership and teachings, female rabbis have left their mark on what is colloquially referred to as breaking the stained glass ceiling.

To date, more than 1,000 women have been ordained as rabbis, and 50 percent of the rabbinic students enrolled at Hebrew Union College Institute of Religion are female, according to the dean of the school. Yet despite their advancements, women rabbis continue to share stories about gender-biased challenges on a daily basis.

It is exactly for this reason that Hara Person feels both excited and nervous about her new post as chief executive of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the professional organization of Reform rabbis that supports its members through continued professional education, job placement, and professional and personal guidance.

As she steps into the role, Person tells The Jerusalem Report about her plans, expected obstacles, and being the first woman to take on the challenge.

Why did you want to become a rabbi?

My decision to become a rabbi was a careful choice, though my road to Reform Judaism happened by chance. I became a Reform Jew at age 10 when my Conservative rabbi suggested I would better enjoy religious school elsewhere, and the only other local option was Reform. He was right. Within several months of joining that synagogue I decided I wanted to be a rabbi, but I encountered some twists and turns along the way to rabbinic school.

After college I knew I wasn’t yet ready and I moved to Israel, where I lived for several years. I worked and lived in Jerusalem, and also studied art at Camera Obscura in Tel Aviv. After several years, I came back to New York to attend graduate school, earning a Master of Arts in Fine Arts. While in school, I worked as the education director at a synagogue. After rabbinic school I accepted a position working at Jewish publishing at the Union for Reform Judaism Press, which I then did (there and at CCAR) for 21 years. Publishing resources for the Jewish community, collaborating with rabbis and others to create high-quality liturgical and educational material for the Jewish world, identifying opportunities for rabbis to connect and support each other, and raising the profile of the rabbi in the wider community was exciting, fulfilling work. I also did some congregation work, including teaching and a High Holy Day position.

As an art student I was trained to bring different and even opposing ideas together to create a new, vibrant whole. Both Judaism and art are bound up with the ongoing task of reinvention and rethinking, pushing up against the expected. The study and practice of creative expression taught me that new ideas and solutions come from the willingness to take intellectual and conceptual risks. From the start, my rabbinic path nourished my intellectual curiosity, allowed me to draw on my early background in Jewish education and in fine arts, and afforded me the privilege of serving the Jewish people while continuing to grow, learn, and broaden my skills.

Can you explain the role of CCAR’s chief executive?

There are many different aspects to the role. One part of it is being a rabbi to rabbis – helping them with professional and personal challenges or crisis, or directing them to the right people who can help. One part of it is running the organization itself – setting the vision, aligning the vision with our mission, managing staff, and overseeing all the day-to-day operations.

Rabbi Hara Person holds up the Torah during a prayer service
Another part of it is helping to raise the rabbinic voice, to speak out on the issues of concern to Reform rabbis, and to make sure that our rabbinic progressive Jewish values are part of the religious discourse on issues of the day. Yet another part is to work with our Reform Movement partners to support and strengthen the Reform communities in North America, in Israel, and around the world, as well as to work with other Jewish leaders worldwide on challenges that affect all of us. So too, there are also times when we partner with other faith groups on issues where joining our voices together can do some good in the world. Another part is fundraising to make sure we can do the sacred work of supporting rabbis and thus supporting and strengthening the communities they serve.

Did you ever imagine yourself in this role?

No! Certainly as a child this was not what I dreamed about. And even until a few years ago it would have been hard to imagine. But eventually the idea began to intrigue me. It seemed like an interesting challenge. I care deeply about rabbis, about the rabbinate, about our communities, and about the CCAR. And I realized that I had been gaining many of the specific skills that it takes to run a nonprofit, in addition to my rabbinic skills and my publishing background.

So it began to seem like a logical next step, even though I wasn’t sure I’d be chosen. How does it feel to be the first female to take on this position?

It feels both entirely natural, and also somewhat intimidating: natural, because it makes sense to me in terms of my interest and skills and experience, and because I’ve never been afraid to be a first as a woman, to be unapologetic about expecting to be treated well and fairly. I was raised to believe that I was entitled to the same things that a boy was, and to not be afraid to open my mouth or take up space. As a child, I was the first girl in my synagogue to ask to wear a tallit at my bat mitzvah. My mother and my grandmother were both women who worked and had careers and I saw how important it was to them to have professional lives and identities. I also think that going to a college that had only recently gone co-ed (it had been a men’s college previously) helped prepare me to speak up and to demand a seat at the table, so to speak. But it’s also intimidating because I feel like there are a lot of eyes on me, and that in order to be taken seriously, I need to always get it right. There’s an expectation that I can be a role model for younger women, as well as of course for men, and that feels like a huge responsibility. I have to make up the rules as I go in some ways, and that feels big but also exciting, and doable.

What are the biggest obstacles facing female rabbis?

We’ve certainly come far since Rabbi Sally Priesand was ordained in 1972. But there’s still a way to go. Women rabbis still deal with too many inappropriate comments about their bodies, the way they dress, and their personal lives. Women rabbis face gender bias that impacts on hiring, professional advancement, and salaries – we still have not achieved pay equity between women and men. Sometimes women rabbis aren’t taken seriously as authority figures, or are seen as less than their male counterparts. Women experience undermining behavior and diminishment. And there are still issues of sexual harassment and assault. Our Jewish institutions are not immune from the same issues facing women in society at large – the same obstacles operate in a Jewish setting.

Are the obstacles different for female rabbis in Israel?

Our female colleagues in Israel face the same obstacles, but to an even greater degree since women rabbis and Reform Judaism overall are less accepted than in North America. For example, many Reform rabbis in Israel count on weddings to supple-
What will be the focus of your work as chief executive?

Our rabbinate is increasingly diverse in terms of the ways that our members serve as rabbis, and in terms of personal identities—beyond anything that our founders could have imagined. One challenge for us going forward is how we will meet the needs of that wonderfully diverse membership in meaningful ways. What services and support can we offer them, and how do we fund that work?

Another challenge is the increasing diversity of the Jewish community: how can we help rabbis prepare their skill sets to meet their needs? How can we help rabbis as some synagogues in certain areas are shrinking, while other areas are seeing tremendous growth?

Then we have suddenly intensified issues like antisemitism that we need to address and respond to—how can we best understand the underlying issues, address them, and lead our communities on them. How can we engage, and lead our communities, in civil, productive conversations on divisive questions about Israel, and on domestic issues in the United States like racial justice, reproductive rights, and the child detention centers; supporting our rabbis in expressing moral leadership while recognizing a diversity of thinking within our rabbinate is another area of focus. The CCAR and the Reform rabbinate of the 21st century is going to look different than the CCAR of the past. We remain anchored in tradition as we stretch into the needs and challenges of the future. I hope that when I look back on my tenure the changes will be obvious. But I’m not going to come in and make sweeping changes right away. I want to be thoughtful and careful about making significant changes, and to do them in partnership with our board and leadership.

What legacy do you want to leave on the CCAR?

It’s a little strange to talk about my legacy before I’ve even begun. But I would hope that I leave an organization that is even stronger than it is today, an organization that has a strong sense of mission and purpose, and has achieved some amount of sustainability in order to withstand the challenges of the next century. I’d like to leave a legacy of strong support for rabbis and a myriad of ways to support the ongoing growth and development of rabbis, wherever and however they serve. I’d like it to be clear what we stand for as Reform rabbis, and for us to be known for speaking out for justice. I’d also like to leave a legacy about being a female leader and creating a new model of what leadership can look like.

What are the biggest issues facing the Jewish world today?

Where to start? The rise of white nationalism and the increase in overt antisemitism are of course suddenly huge issues in a way that would have seemed unimaginable just a few years ago; the challenge of making Judaism relevant in today’s world, which is hardly a new issue but needs new approaches; the challenge of supporting our synagogues and other Jewish institutions, and enabling them to thrive and meet the needs of the community; the challenge of creating communities that are as inclusive and welcoming as they aspire to be.

The divisiveness around Israel is getting worse every day—how we talk to each other within the Jewish world about Israel, never mind with those outside the Jewish community. And of course not just how we talk about Israel, but what we actually do about Israel. What, how, and when do we support Israel? How, when, and why do we criticize Israel, or hold Israel accountable? There is a growing inability to speak to those who see things differently and an increasing mistrust about each other’s motivations. We’re way too quick to attack and condemn each other, to fling accusations that undermine our ability to speak together and certainly make it impossible to speak as one.