

## "Boiled in Oil" Seven Conversations on What it Means for a Syrian Jewish Woman to Become a Rabbi

by Dianne Esses

I. Telling my parents of my decision to enter rabbinical school.

We were at dinner at the Famous Dairy restaurant on West 72nd Street. It was the end of March and I had been admitted to the Seminary over a month ago. For months I had dreaded just this moment, but I had to tell them before they called me at work one day and discovered I was no longer employed. Throughout dinner I kept straining to hear the conversation of the couple next to us. They were obviously on a "shiduch" date, asking each other about their likes and dislikes, their habits and goals. For once I wished that I was just like them: suffer through a couple of arranged dates and presto: a detailed script to follow the rest of my life. Wondering how was I going to bring up my subject, I was half-heartedly involved in the dinner conversation. Tell them on the phone, I began to think, the distance will be safer.

Jarring me out of my private world, my father created the perfect opening. "Just what are you doing with your life? You never made a commitment to anything!"

"Well, that may be true - but there's something I want to make a commitment to now."

"What!"

"I'm planning to go to rabbinical school next year," I said, and held my breath.

Editor's Note: The Syrian community is unique in its solidarity and cultural pride. It is also unique for some of its mishagas, to borrow an "ichy" (Ashkenazi) word. The rabbis of the Syrian community, for example, have issued an edict every year since the 40's forbidding intermarriage *to converts*. In my own family, my very Orthodox cousin has forbidden me from saying *divray Torah* at his Shabbat table because I go to JTS. -D.S.

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"Rabbinical school!" my father exclaimed with a look of disbelief. "That's hard. You've never done anything hard in your life."

Meanwhile my mother looked like she had just been hit by a truck. "Mom! Mom are you okay??"

"I'm okay." She spoke slowly. "Just give me a minute to digest this." Her expression remained frozen. I knew it would take much longer than a minute. I felt like I was killing her. My father interrupted our interaction: "Why don't you get married and have a man put you through school?"

"I don't need a man to put me through school. I can put myself through school."

"If you marry a rich man you can do whatever you want."

"I can do whatever I want now."

"What about marriage and children?"

"I want that too."

"First things first."

"Okay. First I'll go to rabbinical school."

I again turned to my mother. I knew my father was tough and that by now he expected the unexpected from me, but my mother - my mother who grew up in Haiti and South America, who expected women to be sweet and passive and had no concept of them in the public sphere, my mother who thought it was "cute" when I graduated from college, who thought that none of the work that I had ever done was "serious", that I was just waiting for the right man to marry - how would she take this? I was terrified that I would destroy her, that it would destroy our relationship, that the gap I was creating could never again be crossed by words. "Mom, are you okay?" I repeated, begging her to respond to me, to reassure me that we still had a common language.

"It's just that I can't imagine it," she said. "I can say my daughter the teacher, or my daughter the social worker, or even what you're doing now... but my daughter the rabbi?"

II. Lunch with my mother a couple of weeks later.

Again I brought up the subject. I thought somehow if we could just talk it out we would come to an understanding. But, much to my disappointment, the therapeutic fantasy of "express your feelings and everything will be okay" doesn't always work. And, as I discovered, the rift is sometimes too great to be sewn up with mere words.

"Mom, why does it upset you? What about it upsets you?"

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"You're going against our way."  
 "What way is that?"  
 "Orthodox."

"You're Orthodox?!" I exclaimed. Although I had grown up in an ethnically traditional community and had attended a modern Orthodox yeshivah, my parents did not keep kosher outside their home, nor did they keep Shabbat. On Shabbat my father would go to shul and then to work afterwards, which is not atypical for a Syrian man. As a child it was I who demanded that we separate our dishes and it was I who wanted my family to keep Shabbat. Moreover, when I began to be observant as an adult my parents were disturbed and puzzled, thinking I was becoming a fanatic.

*Orthodox. I repeated to myself quite puzzled.*

III. Dinner with my parents and a friend of theirs.

I was visiting my parents last July in Deal New Jersey, the summer resort of the Syrian Jews. We were going out to dinner with a friend of theirs, Denise, a woman roughly my mother's age and recently divorced. On the way into the restaurant my father whispers to me, "Don't mention anything about rabbinical school until things calm down." Just what was supposed to calm down, I wondered. But since we were already in the restaurant and their friend was present, I decided not to ask - at least for that night. I had caused them enough pain already. So when Denise's inevitable question of what I was doing came up, I told her the truth and said calmly: "I'm working at the Brooklyn Historical Society." Somehow this response provoked my father to blurt out, "And what about insurance at the school next year." My father always worries about the status of my insurance; disaster seems to be ever present in his mind. Denise perked up and said, "School? Are you going to school next year?"

"Yeah," I said reluctantly. I was stuck now. "I am."

"What school?"

"The Jewish Theological Seminary."

"You're not going full time are you?"

"Oh no!" I lied emphatically.

"You're not going to become a rabbi, are you?"

"God forbid!" I said, with much shock in my voice. The situation was so replete with irony that the emphasis with which I imbued my lies felt like the only possible way to tell the truth. Like this was some kind of joke between me and God.

"Good" she said. "I know a woman who teaches at the J.C.C."

where I swim and she is actually studying to be a rabbi." Her tone was full of distaste. "Can you imagine?"

"No" I said, my first honest response. For somewhere inside me I still could not imagine that women had the right to possess the tradition.

IV. With my mother in the cafeteria of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

"Mom, look, I understand that this is uncomfortable for you, but I can't keep it a secret. I can't lie about what I'm doing."

"You don't have to lie. Just say you're studying Jewish Studies. Why do you have to say you're becoming a rabbi?"

"I can't do that Mom. I can't deny what I'm doing."

"They won't understand. They'll look at you like you're crazy. What do you mean 'rabbi'?" they'll say." Her voice was harsh.

"Then I'll just have to deal with that."

She pursed her lips and said "okay" in a tone which told me that it wasn't "okay" at all. There was a long uncomfortable silence as we gathered our things and began walking out of the museum. She broke the silence as we moved towards the door. "Look at those plants," she said in a warm voice, full of admiration. "Aren't they beautiful?"

"Yes," I said and we stopped for a long moment to gaze, grateful there was something left for us to share.

V. The reaction of a young Syrian woman who works at the Sephardic Community Center in Brooklyn.

"I heard you're in rabbinical school" she said. "Very nice. What will you be when you come out?"

"Well, I'm not sure," I said. I felt I had to put a disclaimer on what I was doing - diffuse the power of it somehow. "I'm not sure that I'll take on a congregation. I may teach or write, or counsel. There are many things I can do."

"But what will you be when you get out - a rebbitzen?"

"No, no, I'll be a rabbi."

"You mean people will actually call you 'Rabbi'?"

"Uhm-hm" I said uncomfortably.

"Very nice," she said in a strained voice. "Very nice."



*Rabbi FAIR is a Rabbi who used to teach at J.T.S. At a point he was married to a woman in the Syrian community.*

for a nice Jewish girl. It's not even a job for a nice Jewish boy. Be an educator - get a masters degree in Jewish studies and a masters in counseling. You could have a position in any Orthodox synagogue, you could work in the community, no door will be closed to you."

VII. The Inner Conversation

They can no longer boil me in oil. No longer excommunicate me because I no longer live in their midst. I have excommunicated myself.

Still the burden of guilt, the weight of guilt prevents flight: the guilt of separateness, of living my own life, of assuming my own mission. And so to alleviate this guilt I punish myself, boil myself in oil. That is how I prevent the separation. I destroy myself to prevent free flight.

Because freedom must be a sin - the freedom and power of a woman must be a sin - or else why all the anger, the strained voices, the disgusted looks, the shame... the invisibility of a woman who is different?

How can I believe in a self, in a mission, that causes these reactions? If the world is the mirror by which we know ourselves, than the self that I have come to know is evil.

But there must be a way to know the self other than the reactions of others. And of course there have been other reactions - that of friends and teachers who say "Go! Do it! You can do it. You can do it well!"

Somehow those voices of encouragement pale next to the primary voices: the voices of family, of community, of history.

But there must be another way to know the self. We cannot be so utterly dependent on others for who we are. What is the source of redemption that can take us beyond this subjectivity and dependence, beyond the prison of a narrow self-image determined by others, to real strength?

There is something inside: constant, knowing the truth, something that is truth - as much as it is covered up, clogged with despair and denial and fear. There is still a source deep inside, a spring, taking me to my self and yet beyond my self.

A source flowing with life and selfhood much deeper than any of the reflections in the sooty and cracked or clean and gilded mirrors others hold up for me.

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"What do you think their reaction will be?" I asked with a sense of oncoming doom and yet relief that there was a Syrian rabbi there for the asking.

"You'll be boiled in oil," he said.

"What does that mean - on a practical level?"  
 "Remember what they did to Fair, and just for teaching there.\* They don't understand the Seminary - they don't know from it."

"But practically, what does it mean?" I insisted upon an answer to my question. I had to know. If I knew, then at least I would be able to replay the nightmare in my own head enough times so that when "it" actually happened, "it" would pale next to the visions of my own creation. "Would it mean that I would not be able to be married in a Syrian Synagogue? That a Syrian Rabbi would not perform the wedding? You, you for instance, would you marry me?" (Since this rabbi was already married with children he understood that I wasn't proposing.)

"Are you asking me to answer the question from a public, private or halakhic perspective? Are you asking me would I marry you in Brooklyn, or somewhere in the hills of upstate New York?"

At this point I began to feel confused, but I also realized that there was a big "no" in his jumbled answer.

"Halakhically there's no problem in marrying anyone. Even if he or she is a criminal - I mean is there?" Since I haven't yet studied for my rabbinical school entrance exams I felt I was on shaky ground talking to a man who was doing his Ph.D. at Yeshivah University.

"Well, you're probably right. But someone who's considered an idolator or a destroyer of religion might be a problem."

"Is that what you consider me?"

"No, God forbid! But that is what you might be considered... Look, it's too much of a threat. The community isn't ready. Even the larger community. There's a right time for everything. Maybe in twenty years. But not now."

"Look, it's like Tiannamen Square - there was a blood bath because the Chinese weren't ready for democracy... This isn't a job

\*Jose Fair, a rabbi in the Syrian community, cannot hold a position in the community due to various "heretical" acts, including teaching at the Jewish Theological Seminary.