

**New York, May 4, 2006, Blu Greenberg, *Author, President and Founder Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance***

My own story begins in the fall of '72, in the waiting room of my dentist in Riverdale. I picked up a copy of the Ladies Home Journal and found a small article about Reform Judaism HUC - JIR ordaining a woman, Sally Preisand. I had not heard of her before nor of this action, and I was shocked, stunned...

Reform Judaism had crossed the line, one drawn in the sands and earth of Sinai. Reform had disconnected itself from normative Judaism...

Five years later, just as Conservative Judaism was also taking that bold step, I reached a new place in my thinking: perhaps it might even be something of value for my own Orthodox community.

In these last 35 years, Orthodoxy has raised several hundred Jewish women whose talmudic and halachic knowledge, if measured by objective examinations, equal or exceed the requirements for male Orthodox rabbis. Furthermore, Orthodox synagogues have appointed congregational interns who function as assistant rabbis do. We have yoatzot halaka, [halakhic advisors] who study the law and render decisions either to the rabbis or to petitioners directly; toanot, women pleaders who function along with the judges in the bet din. Thirty-three years after Sally Preisand, two or three Orthodox women have been ordained, albeit slightly beyond the mainstream.

It has been a process and I and other women in the Orthodox community – and several representatives of JOFA, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance are here today to celebrate this honor that is being bestowed upon us collectively – and owe a great debt of gratitude, not only to secular feminism for implanting the ethical idea of gender equality but also to liberal Judaism, to the men and women of those denominations whose witness opened our eyes to new possibilities.

But even as we disagree or explore alternate feminist pathways, we uphold all the elements of religious pluralism: respect for one another, learning from one another, not melding into one big indistinguishable blob but remaining clearly identifiable with very strong commitments to one's own value system. Religious pluralism does not mean that anything goes. Religious pluralism means never having to say you're sorry for what you stand for, but always having to listen to what the other believes. Religious pluralism is a far more complex matter than interdenominational Jewish feminism, for it deals with core identity issues such as patrilineal descent, conversion, and Jewish divorce, issues that carry more gravitas than who lights the candles.

But religious pluralism must be inculcated into the establishment, the pace setters and leaders, rabbis and theologians of each religious movement so they will not be content with solutions that work only for one's own group. We must come together with respect, with a heartfelt desire to learn from each other, and with a will to find communal solutions that close the divide.

An open conversation and mutual respect will take us to places that will not be easy, to our denominational synagogues. We will continue to have separate synagogues, and we should consider ourselves lucky to have different denominations for these denominations have created a place for each of us, with norms and structures and community and synagogues that enable us to live as Jews in modern times.

We have lived through so much in the last 60 years. The impact is equal to centuries of Jewish history. We should want to hug each other, or if not that, at least acknowledge how precious each other is. This should move each of us farther from the language of delegitimization. We must appreciate that your sincerity and passion about being Jewish is what drives your changes, and you must appreciate our fidelity to tradition comes out of being deeply nurtured by it as well of our understanding of it as the word of God carried forward for thousands of years.

My final words to you who are graduating today - - you who continue to be and you who will newly be teachers and rabbis and leaders of the Jewish community - - are these: Go into your work with as much love in your hearts as you can find for the whole Jewish people. Stand firm for what you believe but always listen and always keep your minds open. Don't become discouraged if your overtures are rebuffed or your actions are not properly understood. In bringing this love for clal Yisrael to your work, you will not only heal the rift and narrow the divide, but you will also be continuously serving as a valuable model for others in the community, a model that will surely take root, here or there, now or the day after.