

Holy Sparks: Celebrating 50 Years of Women in the Rabbinate

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On June 3, 1972, Rabbi Sally Priesand was ordained by Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion as the first woman rabbi in North America. Her journey was the beginning of an evolution in Jewish life, providing new opportunities for inclusion, diversity, equity, and empowerment across denominations and around the world.

To celebrate this milestone in Jewish and American history, HUC's Dr. Bernard Heller Museum in New York partnered with The Braid's Story Archive of Women Rabbis in Los Angeles to create the exhibition "Holy Sparks," presenting 24 groundbreaking women rabbis who were "firsts" in their time. Portrayed by 24 leading contemporary female-identifying Jewish artists, this exhibition illuminates the profound impact of women rabbis - from the pulpit to the seminary, from military and healthcare chaplaincy to community organizations, and from the U.S. to Europe and Israel. It is particularly meaningful to honor their journeys as we recognize the challenges and harms they have faced, and as we seek to ensure sacred and respectful environments imbued with Judaism's highest ethical values.

The exhibition offers an unexpected approach to what a "portrait" can be, ranging from representational to conceptual depictions. The works are displayed chronologically by the year of ordination, conveying how each decade of trailblazers has provided the foundation for the next. Fourteen distinguished leaders of the Reform movement's congregations and institutions are featured. HUC has ordained 861 women rabbis over the past five decades, and this exhibit is meant to be a celebration of all of them.



Joan Roth photographed Rabbi Priesand, '72, on her pulpit, illuminated by the rainbows that have accompanied her on her life's journey, with the inscription: "The world moves forward every day because someone is willing to take the risk."

Ruth Weisberg portrays the visage of Rabbi Laura Geller, '75, bursting beyond the small scale of her painting, reflecting Geller's impact as the first woman selected to lead a major metropolitan synagogue.



Heddy Breuer Abramowitz's collage expresses the challenges of Rabbi Kinneret Shiryon, '81, the first woman to serve as a community rabbi in Israel, breaking boundaries to transform Israeli society.

Deborah Ugoretz's papercut depicts Rabbi Amy Perlin, '82, holding the Torah aloft, surrounded by inscriptions of the values that have inspired her rabbinate and the blossoming of the flourishing synagogue she founded and led for 32 years.



Jewish Native American artist Emily Bowen Cohen utilizes a comic-strip aesthetic to portray a superhero-like Rabbi Julie Schwartz, '86, the first woman rabbi to serve on active duty as a chaplain in the U.S. military.

Dorit Jordan Dotan portrays Rabbi Denise Eger, '88, the first LGBTQ person to serve as President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, as an angelic presence offering compassion and healing to Jewish HIV/AIDS patients in the 1980s.



Ellen Alt depicts Rabbi Naamah Kelman, '92, the first woman rabbi ordained in Israel and Dean of HUC's Taube Family Campus in Jerusalem, through fragments of biblical text, song lyrics, and a flying tallit, conveying her energetic advocacy for pluralism and women's rights.

Debbie Teicholz Guedalia photographed Rabbi Andrea Weiss, '93, HUC's first woman Provost and associate editor of *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, in her dew-laden garden, wearing her inscribed tallit, "May my teaching drip as the rain, my words flow as the dew."



Harriete Estel Berman's Hanukkah menorah of recycled materials set on her kitchen window likens the invisible communications transmissions of San Francisco's Sutro Tower to Rabbi Noa Kushner, '98, channeling the messages and memories of The Kitchen's congregants to God.

Elizabeth Langer's patchwork collage, inspired by scripture-laden textiles of Southern Black women quilt-makers, describes the journey of Rabbi Hara Person, '98, as the publisher and first woman Chief Executive of the Central Conference of American Rabbis.



Laurie Gross's mixed media portrait of Rabbi Angela Warnick Buchdahl, '01, weaves together symbols and texts of Warnick's Jewish and Korean heritage, with the resonant spire of *shin* letters rising to the Hebrew inscription, "Sing to God a New Song" (Psalm 96).

Linda Soberman's monoprint juxtaposes Rabbi Tanya Segal, '07, the first woman rabbi in Poland and the Czech Republic, with images of victims of the Shoah and a map of Krakow's old Jewish quarter, where she is leading the renaissance of Jewish life.





Marilee Tolwin inscribes the full text of the landmark 1971 feminist essay by Rabbi Rachel Adler, '12, within the structure of a page of Talmud, to portray her role as a distinguished scholar, professor of Jewish thought at HUC, and advocate for women's rights in Judaism.

Caroly Hamoy conveys Rabbi Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, '13, the first woman appointed to HUC's rabbinical faculty and the editor of *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, through outstretched commandment-inscribed women's gloves, evoking the creative spark of her teaching.



"Holy Sparks" exemplifies HUC's Dr. Bernard Heller Museum's mission: to support contemporary artistic creativity and advance the visual expression of Jewish history, values, and identity within a seminary preparing leaders for the Jewish people. The exhibition closes in New York on May 8, opens on May 19 at HUC's Skirball Museum in Cincinnati, then travels to communities throughout the U.S., including the Indianapolis Center for Interfaith Cooperation, the Jewish Federation of St. Louis, Temple Israel of W. Bloomfield, MI, Congregation Beth Israel in Houston, and other venues.

For further information, visit huc.edu/holysparks or contact holysparks@huc.edu.