

‘Holy Sparks’: Illuminating 50 Years of Women in the Rabbinate Through Art

“Holy Sparks,” a milestone exhibition celebrating 50 years of women in the rabbinate, opened at Hillel UCLA last month and runs until Dec. 15.

Ayala Or-El, JEWISH JOURNAL (December 4, 2024)

<https://jewishjournal.com/culture/377379/holy-sparks-illuminating-50-years-of-women-in-the-rabbinate-through-art/>



Penny Wolin: “Rabbi Sharon Brous,” 2021, Multi-image photograph on canvas Photo: Penny Wolin

“Holy Sparks,” a milestone exhibition celebrating 50 years of women in the rabbinate, opened at Hillel UCLA last month and runs until Dec. 15. The exhibition honors and explores the contributions and legacy of 24 trailblazing women rabbis who were pioneers in their time. Among those are first female rabbis from all over the world who are shown through the works of leading contemporary Jewish women artists.

The exhibition is curated by the Heller Museum at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) in New York and The Braid in Los Angeles.

“We decided to pick 24 women rabbis who were really pioneers,” said Jeanie Rosensaft, director of the Heller Museum. “They were the first of their kind in a variety of ways across the full spectrum of new models of leadership that women rabbis were able to accomplish. We paired them with 24 leading contemporary Jewish women artists, each of whom we felt had an affinity to a particular rabbi story.”

“Holy Sparks” traces the milestones of women in the rabbinate, beginning with Rabbi Regina Jonas, the first woman ordained as a rabbi in modern times, in 1935. Jonas, who was born in Berlin

to an Orthodox Jewish family, was murdered in Auschwitz in 1944, but she inspired many other women rabbis like Rabbi Sally Priesand, the first woman ordained in North America in 1972, Rabbi Amy Perlin, who built her synagogue from the ground up and Rabbi Angela Warnick Buchdahl, the first Korean American woman ordained as a rabbi. The exhibition captures the breadth of these leaders' impact.

These women redefined Jewish leadership, transforming tradition, spirituality, scholarship, and social justice. They confronted opposition and broke glass ceilings, embodying resilience and strength.

The idea for the exhibition began in 2009 with Ronda Spinak, founder of the Braid (formerly known as the Women's Jewish Theater). "We began by interviewing women rabbis to record their experiences and personal stories as they break barriers in a male-dominated field."

After they had 200 filmed interviews, Spinak and co-director Lynne Himelstein narrowed it down to 18 stories and produced a stage production, "Stories from the Fringe." The show featured actors bringing to life the stories of female rabbis.

"Immediately, it was clear that people found them moving," said Spinak. "We continued doing interviews with women rabbis and it took us on a journey. We went around the world and interviewed the first women rabbis in France, Germany, England and Israel. I thought it would be interesting if we could take the most prominent women rabbis from around the world and those who did something significant, pair them with a female Jewish artist and charge them with taking the transcript about these women rabbis. [They could] do a work of art about a phrase or a story about their mission and rabbinate. It was a dream that lived in me quite a long time."

The result is a magnificent collection; each artist uses a different medium, from oil painting to mixed media, photography, textile art and collage.

"The portraits are as diverse as the women they honor," Spinak explained. "Each piece reflects a moment, mission or value central to the rabbi's story."

"The portraits are as diverse as the women they honor ... Each piece reflects a moment, mission, or value central to the rabbi's story." – Ronda Spinak

The exhibition includes works such as Heddy Breuer Abramowitz's collage, which expresses the challenges of Rabbi Kinneret Shiryon, the first woman to serve as a community rabbi in Israel. Joan Roth's photograph shows Rabbi Sally Priesand, surrounded by rainbows — which symbolize hope and inclusion — on her pulpit; Debra Band's intricate paper-cut for Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso captures the Torah as a clay jar emitting jewels, reflecting her ethos. Dorit Jordan Dotan's photograph expresses Rabbi Denise Eger's compassion during the AIDS crisis through angelic images, while Rabbi Naamah Kelman's fight for pluralism in Israel takes form in Ellen Alt's calligraphic work.



L to R: Ronda Spinak, Jeanie Rosensaft and artist Marilee Tolwin (Photo by David Chiu)

“The art brings these stories to life in a way that words alone cannot,” Rosensaft said. “It connects viewers to Jewish history, values and identity in a deeply visual and emotional way.” Seven rabbis and artists attended the Los Angeles opening on Nov. 7, with plans for more to join at the closing event in Dec. 15.

Rosensaft emphasized that the exhibition represents a global view of women transforming Jewish leadership. “These rabbis lead congregations, head academic institutions, serve as chaplains and guide philanthropic organizations. Their impact is everywhere you look in Jewish life today.”

Notably, “Holy Sparks” has already toured six U.S. cities, including New York, Cincinnati and Houston. After its UCLA run, parts of the exhibition will enter permanent collections at The Braid and the Heller Museum, while others return to the artists or private collectors. “There’s even potential for communities to borrow works and expand the exhibition with new portraits,” Spinak said. “It’s exciting to think this could inspire future generations to continue telling these stories.”

As more women enter rabbinical programs across denominations, their leadership continues to shape the Jewish world. Rosensaft highlights HUC-JIR’s new flexible pathways to the rabbinate, which accommodate students balancing careers and families. “We want to meet students where they are and make it possible for them to pursue meaningful, impactful careers in Jewish leadership,” she said.

Ultimately, “Holy Sparks” is more than an art exhibition. It is a testament to the courage, creativity, and commitment of women who have redefined Jewish life. “They remind us of the strength of our tradition, our values, and the transformative power of leadership. They are sparks that will ignite the Jewish future,” Rosensaft said.

Rosensaft added that she is appreciative that the exhibition has a prominent presence at UCLA especially during this time.

“We know that our Jewish students on college campuses are confronting so much antisemitism and anti-Zionism, they have felt very challenged and threatened and even unsafe,” she said. “We hoped that the presentation of this exhibition would bring them strength and courage. When each of these women embarked on their careers as women rabbis they confronted tremendous challenges because of their gender. They really had to fight hard to break through that glass ceiling in a variety of settings and yet they emerged successful and resilient. We’re hoping that the stories and portraits of these incredibly courageous women rabbis will bring strength to the students and faculty on the UCLA campus.”