

## **“La Donna Rabbino”: The Chief Rabbi of Rome Considers the Question of Women in the Rabbinate\***

Riccardo Di Segni

Translated by Daniel A. Klein

**Abstract:** An analysis, by one of the leading contemporary Orthodox rabbis of Italy, of the possibilities and problems presented by the idea of the woman rabbi. After reviewing the background and bases of the feminist call for women rabbis, the author examines the many different roles that the modern rabbi fulfills, and he concludes that at least some of these roles might well be assignable to women. However, the author opposes a female rabbinate that is “limited to an imitation of the male role,” and he cautions that any changes must take place within the framework of halakhah. Among the issues he discusses are (1) whether the biblical Deborah can serve as a precedent for women exercising a judicial function, (2) *tzeni'ut* as a factor limiting a woman’s public role, (3) sociological constraints as opposed to halakhic considerations, and (4) the phenomenon of the “wise woman who is qualified to instruct” (*ishah hakhamah ha-re'uyah lehorot*).

**Biography:** Rabbi Dr. Riccardo Di Segni, Chief Rabbi of Rome since 2002, is also the Director of the Collegio Rabbinico Italiano (of which he is a graduate) and a practicing radiologist. Among his many fields of interests are bioethics and Jewish-Christian relations. His is the author of four books, including *Noten ta'am leshevach: ta'ame hakashrut baparshanut hayehudit* (Rome, 1998), and more than 40 articles on a wide variety of Judaic subjects.

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### **Translator’s Foreword**

As soon as I came across the original version of this article on an Italian Jewish website, I knew that it deserved exposure to the English-speaking public. Avoiding kneejerk responses to the idea of the woman rabbi—“*la donna rabbino*”—the author takes a calm, rational, and analytic approach to the problem. Although drawing few final conclusions, Rabbi Di Segni offers something to partisans on either side of the debate. On the one hand, he recognizes that “when there are legitimate demands on the part of women, traditional Judaism adapts itself,” and that “it is probable that at least the role of women in Torah instruction and in leadership of religious life will grow progressively even in the Orthodox world.” On the other hand, he warns that “the novelty of the demand and its radical nature with respect to established sociological models require much caution.”

But perhaps the most vital point that Rabbi Di Segni makes is the following: “Given that the rabbinic role is so complex, one unitary analysis is impossible. The limits of what is lawful for a possible assumption of the role by women must be discussed separately with respect to each different function.”

Since 1996, when Rabbi Di Segni’s article was first published, there have been several new developments, such as the emergence of women halakhic consultants (*Yoatzot Halakhah*), the appearance of a few Orthodox prayer groups in which women are called to the Torah or read from it, and indeed, even the private ordination of at least two women by Orthodox rabbis. But to my knowledge, this article remains the most thorough and dispassionate discussion of its topic from the pen of any Orthodox rabbi to date.

Besides translating the text of the original Italian article, I have translated and added three new explanatory endnotes that Rabbi Di Segni very kindly provided in response to my inquiries as to certain points. In addition, I have slightly amplified some of the information in the historical background section.

## **1. Introduction**

The feminist movements of this century, with their demands for emancipation and equal rights for women, have often involved, shaken, and even torn the Jewish world, in its social and legal structures. Among the many feminist claims, one that has emerged in particular is the ordination of female rabbis.

For various reasons, including its small numbers and traditional isolation, the Italian Jewish community has heard only distant echoes of the lively polemics that have agitated other parts of the Jewish world. There has never been an organized request by Italian Jewish women in this regard; in the Italian rabbinical schools there has been a feminine presence for many years, but the program of studies is different from the masculine one, and the academic degrees conferred, though the matter has not yet been well defined, are certainly not comparable to a rabbinic ordination.

The scope of this article is to review the essential terms of the problem and its possible solutions from the perspective of Orthodox Judaism.

## **2. Historical background**

The question of the female rabbinate may seem old, but in reality the practical novelties are quite recent, even within the ambit of the liberal movements, which accepted the principle only with reluctance.

To review some essential data<sup>1</sup>: The first woman rabbi seems to have been a German Jew named Regina Jonas (1902-1944). The moderately Reform rabbinical school in Berlin (the Hochschule fuer die Wissenschaft des Judentums), where Jonas completed her

studies, refused to grant her a rabbinical title, which Jonas then privately obtained from Rabbi Max Dienemann of Offenbach. She dedicated her life to social services, until her deportation to Terezin and death at Auschwitz.

An analogous attempt made in the United States by Helen Levinthal Lyons (1910-1989)--who was the daughter of a Conservative rabbi<sup>2</sup> and had studied in the Jewish Institute of Religion, which later became part of the Reform seminary in Cincinnati (Hebrew Union College)--met with the opposition, although not unanimous, of the academic body, by which the woman was granted, in 1939, an academic degree alone.

Only in 1972 did the same institution confer the first rabbinical title on an American woman, Sally J. Priesand. Since that time, women have made up a third of the students at the Reform and Reconstructionist rabbinical schools.

Longer and more tortuous was the path of the other large American non-Orthodox group, the Conservative movement. In its institution, the Jewish Theological Seminary, a chair in Talmudic instruction was given to a woman in 1974, but the discussion as to the ordination of women rabbis extended until October 1983, when the principle was accepted by a large majority. Orthodox Judaism, for its part, seems to reject for the time being any deviation from the traditional position, under which rabbinical ordination is reserved for men.

### **3. The bases of the feminist demand**

The demand of the feminist movements for women's rabbinic ordination originates out of various considerations, which may be summarized as follows: Jewish society, in its traditional development, has created a division of roles between men and women which places the woman in a subordinate position; in particular, women have been deprived of authority and religious and social power; the function of the rabbi, which most typically represents these roles, is traditionally reserved to men alone. No longer does it seem just, or even tolerable, that a modern society should maintain such a sexist division. In an egalitarian society, the power is equitably redistributed between the sexes.

At the same time, it has been observed, it is not true that there is an absolute and irremediable bar in the traditional sources to women's exercise of rabbinic functions. Principles must be distinguished from social conditions. In addition, there is a need to rediscover the ancient Biblical roots which give rise to an important judicial role for woman, as in the case of the prophetess Deborah (Judges 4:4).

Furthermore, there comes into play over the entire question another determining factor of a psychological and social nature: it is well known to all that Judaism distinguishes between the priesthood and the rabbinate. The former is a condition that is acquired by birth, patrilineally, and is reserved to the male descendants of Aaron. The priestly line continues down to our own days, even though the exercise of the priesthood is suspended in its essential functions due to the absence of the Sanctuary.

The rabbinate, on the other hand, was born much later in Judaism as an intellectual condition, without limitations as to conditions of birth, with roles that are distinct from those of the priesthood. But the status of the Jewish people as “orphans of the priesthood,” deprived of all the holiness and the ceremonial aspect that the priesthood involved, has been endured only in part, and many of the attributes of the priestly role have in some ways devolved upon the rabbinic role. Thus it is that for centuries, the rabbi has integrated certain of these functions, for the rabbi must substitute for the priest who cannot exercise them.

Now it is quite clear that the priesthood was and is, according to the unequivocal Biblical and postbiblical tradition, an exclusively male function, and concerning this, too, there has been a Jewish female protest. However, it is equally clear that this situation can be changed only at the cost of creating a new religion.

But the rabbinate, it is argued, is different from the priesthood, and the exclusion of women from the rabbinate may well be only secondary and unwise, not essential to the religious structure of Judaism, and thus may be abolished without compromising the sacredness of tradition. Women, it is said, must not pay the price of the complex psychological mechanism which has made the rabbi into a substitute for the priest.

Some of these claims take a revolutionary approach with respect to the Jewish legal structure, an approach that does not take into account the traditional system of authority, its modalities of transmission, and its internal coherence. Other such claims attempt, with various nuances, to fit into the structure of halakhic reasoning, aiming to promote from within a change that is radical as well. In Orthodox Judaism, such changes are theoretically possible, as long as the rules of codification are respected. The criterion by which it is determined whether one is inside or outside the Orthodox system is not so much the revolutionary nature of one's action, but rather the validity of the logical and juridical procedure by which consent is obtained.

The problem is to understand what the legitimate limits may be within which argument is possible, at least theoretically, even from a perspective that is Orthodox and respectful of tradition.

#### **4. The role of the rabbi**

To understand the responses to these claims, a clarifying premise as to the role of the rabbi must be stated. Generally definable as a *teacher* within Jewish society, the rabbi actually exercises a nucleus of essential functions as well as a collection of accessory functions that have been united in various ways and in varying degrees of intensity in the various Jewish communities of the world and in the course of Jewish history. Essentially, the rabbinic function is of a dual nature: *hora'ah* and *dayyanut*.<sup>3</sup>

The first of these terms denotes the capacity and the authority to impart practical instructions as to how to conduct oneself in questions of Halakhah. Presented with a doubtful case, or one in which there is a controversy in the codes, one refers a question (*she'elah*) to the rabbi, who is the person who has been granted, by means of ordination (*semikhah*), the permission and authority to instruct; the response received becomes binding upon the questioner. The second of these roles is the capacity to judge, which is exercised by serving on a *Beit Din*, a rabbinic tribunal composed, in its most elementary structure, of three judges, who may serve as such precisely because they have received the requisite ordination.

Though these are the two essential functions, it is well known that many rabbis often do not actually exercise them, or do so only in part, while the community may request its rabbis to fulfill other functions (listed here in an informal order that does not reflect a valuation of their importance):

- Teaching the traditional Jewish culture at various levels of specialization and in varied contexts, formal (scholastic institutions, synagogues) and informal, orally and in writing.
- Serving as a role model and a preacher of morality (which is not necessarily the same thing as teaching). The rabbi comes to be seen as the custodian and the guarantor of correct moral behavior according to Jewish tradition, as the one who must set a personal example and, where necessary, reprimand those who behave incorrectly.
- Providing social assistance as a counselor, a resolver of controversies, a source of aid in difficult social cases, and a reference and guarantor to third parties.
- Collecting and distributing funds for assistance to the needy, by virtue of the honesty, authority, and discretion that are necessary to carry out these activities.
- Leading public religious functions inside and outside the synagogue, with the assumption, when necessary, of the role of conductor of certain ceremonies: weddings, circumcisions, bar mitzvahs, funerals, special *aliyyot* to the Torah (the Ten Commandments, etc.).

In some cases, as with a wedding, the conduct of the ceremony on the part of an expert is requested or expected, even though ultimately not indispensable. In other cases, the rabbi assumes a role that is more honorary and representative than legal:

- Control of ritual public services, with particular reference to *kashrut* and *mikveh*.
- Political representation of the community, as a spokesperson to the external authorities, with respect to the requirements and moral values of the tradition and the community.

Some roles that are distinct from those of the rabbi—who need only be in control of such functions—are the roles of ritual slaughterer and meat inspector (*shohet* and *bodek*), circumcisor (*mohel*), scribe (*sofer*), synagogue cantor (*hazzan*), and reader of the Sefer Torah, but quite often these roles are, at least in part, assumed directly by the rabbi.

The reasons why all of these functions are attributable to the rabbi are various. Often it is a matter of choices that are coherent with the tradition and amply documented in ancient, authoritative sources that are above suspicion. Some roles are attributed to the rabbi by logical necessity (who better than rabbis, with their learning and authority, could take on such functions?), or by virtue of respect for the Torah which the rabbi represents. Sometimes, however, these roles are the expression of a lack of education or observance on the part of the community, which instead of participating actively in certain functions and distributing them democratically, prefers to delegate them to those few who have remained observant.

The lack of a priesthood, as mentioned above, has certainly had a role in the attribution of additional and *sacral* functions to the rabbi. A role that once was primarily one of teaching and judging has thus been burdened inevitably with other attributes, to the point of becoming a psychological reference point,<sup>4</sup> with all the typical implications of a masculine and paternal figure.

## **5. The limits of the lawful for women**

Given that the rabbinic role is so complex, one unitary analysis is impossible. The limits of what is lawful for a possible assumption of the role by women must be discussed separately with respect to each different function. The question becomes complicated, because for each of the functions discussed above, one can find in the tradition an absolute “no,” a “yes,” or a theoretical authorization that becomes a “no” in practice.

In the space of this article, a detailed analysis is not possible; nevertheless, some preliminary clarifications are possible and necessary.

According to the traditional formulation, the positions of man and woman with regard to Jewish law are different. The commandments, as is well known, are classified into two categories, the prohibitions and the positive norms. As far as the prohibitions are concerned, women and men have the same obligations, while only a part of the positive norms are incumbent upon women. The ancient sources (Mishnah Kiddushin 1:7) suggested a general rule under which to arrange the women’s exemptions; this rule encompasses only those norms whose fulfillment is closely tied to a set time. The rule is only a general one, and thus there are time-bound norms that women are obligated to observe, and others that are not time-bound but from which women are exempt. This distinction gives rise to the problem of whether it is legitimate, opportune, or even desirable for women to observe the rules from which they are exempt, and if they do so, whether they may recite the pertinent blessings. The answers to this question vary

according to the precept under consideration, and for each precept there are different opinions among the authors.

A particularly complex case within the scope of this discussion is that of the right or obligation to study Torah, a positive commandment that is not time-bound and from which women have traditionally been excluded and even precluded according to some strict lines of tradition from the time of the Mishnah. The point in question is decisive, for it is inconceivable to have a rabbi without the scholarly background that only study can provide.

It is a given fact that in the course of history, women's religious instruction has been much reduced in comparison to that of men. But this rule has known some exceptions, distinctions, and evolutions which, during the past century, have not been unmarked even in the strictest circles. Cases of women who have asked permission to study have been known in every era; the response that the rabbinic authorities have given to such requests has been generally and substantially positive, albeit perplexed. Furthermore, a distinction has always been made as to the topics and texts that are to be the subject of such study. The principle that it is legitimate, even desirable, for women to study the norms that pertain to them most specifically has been accepted without grave objections. Even the Orthodox world itself has recognized the necessity of a religious instruction for women that is tied to the educational role that the woman ought to have within the sphere of the family or certain scholastic institutions. Today it is common for girls to study religious materials, and for them there are separate schools even in the most Orthodox circles.

The problem is that despite such evolutionary developments, the programs of study remain different; there exists a traditional reluctance, which is diminishing only in part, to include women in courses dealing with specifically rabbinic materials such as Talmud and *posekim*, at least at the highest levels, which are the true key to the exercise of the rabbi's teaching and judging authority.

At this point it is necessary to point out a paradox: the tradition, fairly reluctant as to a woman's right or obligation to study, is theoretically far less so as to a woman's right to *hora'ah*. Unimpeachable classic sources speak of the "wise woman who is qualified to instruct" (*ishah hakhamah ha-re'uyah lehorot*),<sup>5</sup> and who is permitted to exercise such a function and, in so doing, is subject to the same limitations as qualified men. The theoretical possibility thus exists; historical examples are known, sporadic but not extremely so, but the problem remains as to how women are to arrive at the exercise of such a function.

The other fundamental aspect of the rabbinic role, the exercise of the judicial function, has been the subject of discussion for centuries as far as women are concerned. The question is affected by two opposing considerations: the first is the principle, explicit and established in the rabbinic laws, of the exclusion of women from serving as witnesses, at least with respect to a considerable portion of the law. Then there is the principle that *whoever is qualified to judge is qualified to give testimony*. Yet all of this

goes against a precise Biblical datum, referred to above: Deborah the prophetess judged Israel (Judges 4:4). A famous note by the Tosafot (Niddah 50a, s.v. *kol*) proposes various solutions for this contradiction:

1. The rule that *whoever is qualified to judge is qualified to give testimony* applies only to men and not to women.

2. Deborah judged “according to the Divine word” (*al pi ha-dibbur*), that is, by means of a precise and specific Divine instruction.

3. Deborah did not directly exercise judicial activity, but rather taught the rules of judicature. Another comment of Tosafot (Shevu’ot 29b, s.v. *shevu’at*) adds –

4. Given that Deborah was a prophetess, the people accepted her authority.

According to the first solution, judicial activity would be permitted to women, while it would not be according to the other solutions; the third, however, does leave the way open for instruction by women, and the fourth gives consent to female judgeship under particular conditions.

The prevalent and established norm that results from these discussions (simplified here to the maximum) is that women do not exercise the activity of a judge, and so it is in practice, but there is not total unanimity on this subject, and a permissive approach could exist theoretically.<sup>6</sup>

If the question of judgeship is in some ways controversial, the problem of public positions has been expressed in terms that are apparently even more distinct and negative. According to Maimonides, just as kingship in Israel is a male attribute, so every other position in the community of Israel must be filled by men (Hilkhos Melakhim 1:5). It should be pointed out that this rule has been codified only by Maimonides, and as far as the concept of public positions is concerned, even in the most rigorously Orthodox world there have been frequent examples of reinterpretation and circumvention of this norm.

Another great question that affects the entire problem is the general role that the tradition attributes to the woman as opposed to the man. In the theoretical framework, there is a distinction between a masculine role of inclusion in the outside world, in society and public affairs, and a feminine *internal* role, according to which the walls of the home are the “realm” where the “king’s daughter” (in keeping with the expression of Psalm 45:14, “All the dignity of the king’s daughter is within”) exercises her authority and expresses herself. The woman’s dedication to home and family would explain the abovementioned exemption from an extensive series of positive norms.

While this distinction is considered intolerable by the present feminist protest, which demands equal roles for man and woman in external society as well as in the family, implicitly attributing to the domestic role a subordinate and negative position, the apologists for the traditional concept deny that difference means subordination; engagement in the private domain is equally noble, meritorious, and gratifying--if not more so--as engagement in the public domain, and thus there is no degradation but merely differentiation.

Linked and correlated in some ways to this distinction are the traditional concepts that impose a role of “modesty” (*tzeni'ut*) upon all that is feminine, and that are associated with those precedents that limit the possibility of a public feminine role. Up to what point is it lawful for a woman to show herself in public in a role that is so socially determinative? Up to what point is it lawful for a man to go for private counselling with a woman, with the intimacy and reserve that delicate questions may demand?

One may respond to this last question that the same problem arises when it is a woman who turns to a male rabbi; in fact, the existence of female counselors would facilitate a more confidential and open dialogue between persons of the same sex. But there remains the problem of public exposure and leadership roles for women, which is often evaluated in a negative fashion in the classic sources, most likely based on social conditioning. To limit the public presence of women, the concept of “public decorum” is resorted to. For example, women may theoretically read the Torah publicly, forming part of the seven who are called to the Torah and who divide among themselves the portion to be read; but this responsibility is not granted to them “by reason of public decorum” (*mi-penei kevod ha-tsibbur*).

Many in the Conservative movement have already decided that it must be today's public who decides what is decorous for the public, so that they call women to the Torah and have them read the Torah. However, no Orthodox synagogue has gone beyond these boundaries; such synagogues are convinced that what is “indecorous” for the public according to an established tradition cannot be suddenly overturned.

More generally, a female role as a public representative, as a rabbi is called upon to exercise in many situations, would come to put in jeopardy a global traditional model of modesty and reserve. Here there is probably more of a sociological difficulty than a legal difficulty. But sociology, too, has its importance, and it may become a symbol that is even more difficult to modify than the halakhah itself. In recent times, these very aspects have been emphasized and exalted in an apologetic, opposing viewpoint. In any case, one cannot lightly value the argument of the traditionalists who attribute to this division of characteristics a fundamental role in the very survival of Judaism.

It is thus a matter of being able and obligated to distinguish, case by case, between the real and concrete legal restrictions that derive from the norms of reserve, modesty, and public decorum, and those restrictions superimposed by sociology which, although important, are not unobjectionable under changed surrounding conditions.

Some ritual aspects, closely bound up with the feminine condition, may ultimately come into play in certain perspectives: for example, the limitations imposed by the menstrual cycle. Actually, these limitations are essentially domestic and have to do with relations between spouses, but according to many local traditions, such limitations also pertain to certain public manifestations, such as a woman's very presence in synagogue during the days of the menstrual cycle, or the exercise of certain acts in the synagogue

(such as saluting an open Sefer Torah,<sup>7</sup> or other roles traditionally entrusted to women, e.g. rolling up the Torah wrapper).<sup>8</sup>

A woman rabbi might be limited, in keeping with local custom, in her attendance at synagogue, thus being compelled to reveal personal situations publicly. It might be objected that the force of such local traditions is quite relative and easily abrogated, but even in that case, as in all the others that we are considering, the problem is whether there can be new instructors of Torah in Israel, rather than persons who, by their very presence, place in jeopardy behaviors and customs that have been established for centuries. It should be noted that in this aspect of the problem, it is argued that women should be asked to do what a male rabbi does, that is, to be in the synagogue and lead its functions. The problem is thus being posed in terms of a total imitation of the male role. The limits of such an argument are obvious.

For every individual aspect of the question, there has by now developed an ample literature which tends to demonstrate, or not, the legitimacy of the assumption by women of certain roles that some consider to be precluded not so much by a legal principle as by an established behavioral tradition that has never before been challenged. It has been discussed, for example, whether a woman may perform a marriage ceremony, and up to this point the discussions have remained within the sphere of argumentation in fairly traditional terms. However, from here the discussions have often passed to more radical positions, such as in the debate over women's participation in a *minyan*, or the capacity to serve as a *shaliah tsibbur* or to give testimony, and in these cases, the use of the traditional sources has not been very rigorous, but often quite unconstrained and even captious.

## **6. Concluding considerations**

The problem of women in the rabbinate is, as has been seen, extremely complex and articulated. Every aspect of the question must be treated separately, and for each aspect, even from an Orthodox perspective, there are different possible answers involving openings or closures.

Some accessory aspects that are attributed to the rabbinic function—such as social, moral, and economic assistance, public representation in certain instances, and the function of moral exemplar—may, within certain rather ample limits, be assumed by women, and in fact already are in many Orthodox circles.

The rabbinic function would probably stand to gain in dignity and authenticity if it were stripped of certain aspects that surround it, often as a result of delegation by a community that seeks to burden a single figure with collective responsibilities.

Much more difficult, and probably insoluble within brief periods of time, are the questions of the essential roles. And yet it is probable that at least the role of women in

Torah instruction and in leadership of religious life will grow progressively even in the Orthodox world.

The strange contradiction between certain theoretical openings and de facto closures—which contradiction emerges throughout the entire question from an examination of the sources—should not be disregarded. The demand for a female rabbinate has taken even the nontraditional movements by surprise; besides, it has been and remains essentially a Diaspora demand, one might say typically American, which may indicate that it concerns an impetus that originated outside of Judaism, from a need to reconcile different cultural and religious models.

And yet, precisely with regard to women's questions, traditional Judaism has always found ways to revolutionize its structures, from the question of women's inheritance (Numbers ch. 27) to the institution of the Ketubah to the prohibition of polygamy. That is to say, when there are legitimate demands on the part of women, traditional Judaism adapts itself.

It is too soon to evaluate whether, or to what point, the demand for women's rabbinic ordination may fit into the framework of a consecrated tradition. But the novelty of the demand and its radical nature with respect to established sociological models require much caution.

There is a need to resolve the contradiction that results from the fact that the rabbi is the one who defends and advances the tradition, while there are those who now want this role to be entrusted to a new figure, a development which is itself a break with the tradition.

The risk of a servile imitation of outside models is clearly present. A women's rabbinate that is limited to an imitation of the male role would bring with it a burden of awkwardness and ridicule; such a rabbinate would be self-contradictory and psychologically traumatic.

Better to seek alternative ways that would not be mere imitations of outside models, ways that would ultimately promote the condition of women, integrating it with the knowledge and practice of Torah. From this the entire community of Israel could only benefit.

\* This article first appeared in Italian as an inclusion in *Scritti sull'ebraismo in memoria di Emanuele Menachem Artom*, edited by Sergio J. Sierra and Elena Lea Artom (Jerusalem, 1996) (pp. 175-187). It was republished in *Kolot-Voci* (a newsletter of Morasha.it), 5/5/2003. The original version is accessible online at various websites, including [http://www.morasha.it/controriforma/cr\\_donna\\_rabbino.html](http://www.morasha.it/controriforma/cr_donna_rabbino.html).

## Notes

1. See Robert Gordis, "The Ordination of Women -- a History of the Question," *Judaism* Issue 129, Vol. 33, No. 1, Winter 1984, pp. 6-12. The same issue of *Judaism* contains numerous articles on the same topic, from different points of view.

2. *Translator's note*: Helen Levinthal Lyons' father was Israel Levinthal (1888-1982) of the Brooklyn Jewish Center. Her grandfather was Bernard Levinthal (1862-1952), a leading Orthodox rabbi in Philadelphia.

3. For a systematic exposition, see the entries "Hora'ah" and "Beth Din" in *Talmudic Encyclopedia* (TE).

4. "By the psychological role, I mean the type of relationship that the community quite often establishes with the rabbi, as the person who is needed as a reference for moral or merely ceremonial support. For example: at a family feast, the rabbi is called upon to serve as a "decoration," as the one who sits at the head table, who gives a certain dignity to the gathering, who is presented to the non-Jewish guests, etc. More seriously, there is a sort of role, part paternal and part representative of authority, which can be measured up to, imitated, or flouted." (Private communication from author to translator, 1/31/2002.)

5. See, for example, *Sefer Ha-Hinukh* 158; other sources are indicated in TE, "Hora'ah," col. 493-494, note 109.

6. See TE, "Beth Din," p. 167, and "Ishah," col. 253-254, with notes thereto.

7. "Italy and Rome, in particular, are distinguished by the variety of such customs. In general, at the moment of *hagba'ah*, people stretch out their right arm, with the hand extended as well (all the fingers, not only the little finger, as some Ashkenazim do); the men often do this while holding the *tsitsit*, and many of them, after drawing the arm back, kiss their hand. Among the women, some stretch out both arms with the palms turned toward the Sefer Torah, then draw back their hands (even repeatedly) and kiss them, as if they were throwing a kiss. This is distinct from the customary behaviors when the (closed) Sefer passes by; some kiss it directly (on the *me'il*, or cover), some touch it with the *tsitsit* and then kiss the *tsitsit*, and some bow as it passes; but these are things that are done by the men among whom the Sefer passes." (Private communication from author to translator, 1/31/2002.)

8. See Rema in *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 88.

"I refer to a very old custom that is followed once the Sefer is uncovered. The Sefer is also bound by a wrapper or band (*fascia*), which is brought by the *shamash* to the *ezrat nashim* and passed from hand to hand, each woman rolling it up in part and kissing it before passing it along to her neighbor. Finally the *shamash* reappears to take back the *fascia*. Menstruating women do not participate in this rite (a debatable matter from a

halakhic point of view, since the Sefer is not susceptible to ritual impurity). You might be interested in a recent Roman curiosity: the [former] Chief Rabbi of Rome, Elio Toaff, put a stop to this custom, with the justification (perhaps only formal) that the *fascia* (which in our community is generally old and valuable) was becoming marred by lipstick left by the kisses of devoted women.” (Private communication from author to translator, 1/31/2002.)