



## From Rebbetzin to Maharat

INTERVIEW OF MONIKA KONIGORSKI WITH DINA BRAWER

### Von der Rebbetzin zur Maharat

Vor 18 Jahren wurde JOFA (Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance – Jüdisch-Orthodoxe Feministische Allianz) in den USA gegründet, um die gleichberechtigte Teilhabe von Frauen in der religiösen Sphäre zu fördern. Inzwischen gibt es JOFA auch in Großbritannien, dank der Initiative von Dina Brawer, die gerade eine Ausbildung zur Rabbinerin absolviert. JOFA bietet eine Plattform für Diskussionen zu den spezifischen Themen, die Frauen in den Gemeinden bewegen. Frauen sollen motiviert werden, Talmud und halachische Texte zu studieren, um die Entwicklung des jüdischen Rechts und der Traditionen und die Rechte und Pflichten von Frauen, die sich oft nicht von denen der Männer unterscheiden, besser zu verstehen. Dass Frauen religiöse Führungspositionen bekleiden, ist heute für die ganze Gemeinde wichtig, denn Frauenstimmen bereichern das Torastudium und die Interpretation der Traditionen. Der Wunsch, selbst Rabbinerin zu werden, entsprang bei Brawer aus ihrer Leidenschaft für die Orthodoxie, aus dem Bedürfnis, der Gemeinde zu dienen, um die Menschen dort zu fördern. Als Rabbinerin möchte sie lehren, anleiten und inspirieren, sich durch die Tora und die Mitzwot weiterzuentwickeln. Sie möchte die Möglichkeiten für Frauen im Rahmen der Halachah erweitern. Der Zugang zu Tora und den Mitzwot bietet spirituelle Erfahrungen, die uns mit anderen Jüdinnen und Juden, mit der Gesellschaft und mit Gott verbinden.

**Dina Brawer:** I have recently launched JOFA (Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance) in the UK and am currently studying to become an Orthodox rabbi.

**Monika Konigorski:** *What is JOFA and what are its aims?*

**Dina Brawer:** JOFA was founded 18 years ago in the United States to amplify the voices of women, who want greater participation within religious spaces. A lot has changed because of their activism, but in the community where I live in London, UK, things are slower to change. I launched JOFA as a feminist movement within Orthodox Judaism in the UK in 2013.

We created a platform to discuss the specific issues that women in the community face. Through conferences we introduced great scholars and experts in the field of Orthodox feminism from Israel and the United States,



Dina Brawer. Photo: Ben Gurr

exposing the community to new ideas and new ways of understanding our *Halakhic* traditions.

One of the outcomes is a greater awareness of the importance for women and girls to study Talmud and *Halakhic* texts, that until a few decades ago were the sole preserve of men or boys. Study empowers you to understand how Jewish law and traditions develop and to understand that women are not only permitted, but actually obligated to take part in the majority of *Mitzvot*. For example, many women think that only men can recite *Kiddush*, the blessing over the wine to welcome *Shabbat*, but actually women have the same obligation as men. Similarly, women are not always clear if they can recite *Kaddish*, the mourner's prayer. Our aim is to educate women and encourage communities to invite women's participation.

The second aim is to change the conversation and the language people use. We want rabbis and leaders to actively invite women's participation.

Women now are as well educated as men and are expected to participate in all aspects of society but often, when it comes to the ritual sphere, the expectations are all but non-existent. This means that the Orthodox-Jewish community can miss out on women's wisdom, talents and skills. We need to invite their participation and create access points to study, ritual and religious leadership.

**Monika Konigorski:** *What inspired you to want to become a rabbi?*

**Dina Brawer:** I grew up in an Orthodox home and my Judaism was centred in my home and complemented by my Jewish school. In these two places I learned all the Jewish traditions, rituals, and texts. Synagogue featured in my Jewish life but it was limited to going with my dad on a Shabbat morning.

Synagogue was not the most important part of my Jewish experience. It was one of many Jewish experiences. And so I didn't see the synagogue or the rabbi as particularly important and never aspired to be a rabbi.

I grew up within Chabad-Lubavitch, which is an outreach movement. This gave me a specific leadership model to aspire to. Within Lubavitch, men and women are equally empowered to take responsibility to share the Judaism that they love and are passionate about with other Jews who might know less about their own heritage. Already as a teenager I felt very much committed to fulfilling this role. I studied in a high school in Jerusalem and as part of the program I would go out to the communities and teach Judaism. This shaped my identity, and by the time I graduated I had already decided that I wanted to spend my life serving the Jewish community. And so I did. I married a rabbi, because I was looking for somebody who would share the same passion. And we have worked together for many years in two communities in London.

When I became a spokesperson for Orthodox feminism the question that I was asked consistently was: When are we going to have Orthodox women rabbis? Orthodox women and men asked this question. It made me realize how important having women in a religious leadership role was for so many



people in the Orthodox community. It is not just important for women to be represented in the religious leadership, but the entire community is enriched through the addition of women's voices in the study of Torah and the interpretation of our traditions.

**Monika Konigorski:** *Have you ever thought about changing your denomination in order to become a rabbi, because it's easier and quite normal to have women rabbis within Reform Judaism? Has that ever been an option for you?*

**Dina Brawer:** I am committed to Orthodoxy and love its intensity. My interest in becoming a rabbi stems from my passion for Orthodoxy and my commitment to serve the community in the 'servant leadership' model, a term coined by Robert Greenleaf. In this philosophy, the leader's work is to promote growth within people. I passionately believe that it's in the interest of Orthodoxy's growth to have women serve as religious leaders. That is what drives me and motivates me. I am not becoming a rabbi to fulfil a personal dream. I am Orthodox first and I am studying to become a rabbi to serve that purpose.

**Monika Konigorski:** *What does the role of rabbi mean to you?*

**Dina Brawer:** In Orthodox tradition a rabbi is trained to decide on matters of Jewish law as well as inspire, teach, counsel and lead spiritually. The idea of the rabbi leading the service in the synagogue is one that is borrowed mostly from the progressive movements. In fact, if you go to an Orthodox synagogue most people are skilled to lead the prayers or read from the Torah. Apart from skill, no rabbinic qualification is required.

My personal vision of being a rabbi is to teach, lead and inspire Jews to grow through Torah and *Mitzvot*.

I see myself as an activist, reaching out to people at the grassroots level.

I want to empower people to take responsibility for their Judaism through study and ritual and not rely solely on what's on offer at their synagogues.

I am interested in getting people to take Judaism back home, because I believe home should be the centre of Jewish experience.

**Monika Konigorski:** *Do you get support from your husband, who is already an Orthodox rabbi?*

**Dina Brawer:** I have huge support from my husband, my four sons, and also my extended family and friends. I have been really overwhelmed by people's support and their excitement when I told them that I was enrolling in studying for Orthodox ordination at Yeshivat Maharat.

**Monika Konigorski:** *One last question. It might be a difficult one. How do you feel about the normality of equal rights for men and women, that characterizes secular society? How do you deal with that discrepancy or dissonance?*

**Dina Brawer:** Yes, there is dissonance, but I have been mostly focused on obligation. I see Judaism as obligation rather than rights. Women have been traditionally exempt from some obligations. This can have benefits, when juggling young families, but also leads to lower expectations of women in the context of religious practice.

It is because I am committed to Orthodoxy that I believe we need to raise the expectation we have of women and expand the opportunities that are available to women within *Halakhah*. It's not because I want rights. It's because I want access to Torah and *Mitzvot* that are a powerful spiritual experiences that connect us to other Jews, the wider community and ultimately to God.

The text is based on an interview with Dina Brawer by Monika Konigorski for Hessen Radio. It was conducted at the conference “The Role of Women’s Leadership in Faith Communities. Marking 80 Years of Women in the Rabbinate” held in Potsdam in November 2015.

**Dina Brawer** was born in Milan and raised in an Orthodox Jewish family. She holds degrees in Jewish Studies, Psychology and Education, and is currently studying for Orthodox rabbinical ordination at Yeshivat Maharat in New York. She serves as JOFA’s (Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance) first UK Ambassador. In this voluntary role she has initiated a feminist movement within Orthodox Judaism in Britain with the aim to narrow the gap between the high number of women occupying influential leadership positions in the secular, compared to the limited opportunities in religious spaces. She is doing this by shaping public discourse around this important issue and developing effective tools to positively change this reality. The Jewish Chronicle recently listed Dina in its ‘Power 100 List’ of individuals who are most influential in shaping the UK Jewish community.