

From Rebbetzin to Rabbi: The Journey of Paula Ackerman

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Paula Ackerman (1893–1989)
(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)

One of the most moving episodes in the history of the struggle for women's ordination can be found in the short-lived rabbinic career of Paula Herskovitz Ackerman. A *rebbetzin* who served as rabbi for three years after her husband's sudden death, Ackerman's struggles provide a window into the challenges and possibilities initially associated with the pulpit rabbinate as a career for women. Born in Pensacola, Florida, in 1893, Paula Ackerman had a traditional upbringing and played an active role in her congregation, Beth El. She was confirmed there and also studied Hebrew privately with a local Orthodox rabbi. Though Ackerman hoped to study medicine, her father bristled at the idea, and when the family needed her financial

assistance, she began giving music lessons and teaching at the local high school. At that time she met William Ackerman, who was then serving as Beth El's rabbi. They married in 1919. After two years in Natchez, Mississippi, where their only child, William Jr., was born, the Ackermans moved to Meridian, Mississippi, in 1922, where William served as the rabbi of Temple Beth Israel.¹

An active *rebbetzin* for almost three decades, Ackerman taught Sunday school and preconfirmation classes at Beth Israel. She also served as board member of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods and gained valuable public speaking experience by lecturing on behalf of the organization to local sisterhoods. This helped her comfortably substitute for her husband on the pulpit when he was away or ill.²

William Ackerman died on 30 November 1950, and the synagogue president asked Paula to take her husband's place as spiritual leader until a replacement could be found. Thanks to the following letters, in which she shares her thinking with her childhood rabbi, Jacob D. Schwarz, then national director of synagogue activities for the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), we learn Ackerman's rationale for accepting the invitation to serve as interim rabbi. We also gain insight into the hurdles that she faced and the external factors that influenced her choice.

In the first letter, dated less than two weeks after William's death, Ackerman describes the synagogue board's request that she take over her husband's position:

Dec. 12, 1950

Dear Friend,³

Thank you for your comforting messages and prayers. I think there is comfort in the universal sharing of a great loss and I do realize how much Bill meant to so many people everywhere. We shared so much to-gether—he and I—and both you and he taught me to make God very real in my life. Now He is truly my salvation—my staff and my support.

Our people here too, are being so wonderful to me. I don't know if Dr. Eisendrath⁴ has told you of the unanimous action of the Board here to ask me to continue in Bill's place but I do want you to know it even before I come to some decision in the matter. I'm so well aware of my inadequacy but they've presented it to me in so considerate a manner—they know that the only training I've had is experience—but they want me to give them what I have and they will help me with the rest.

I also know how revolutionary the idea is—therefore it seems to be a challenge that I pray I can meet. If I can just plant a seed for the Jewish woman's larger participation—if perhaps it will open a way for women students to train for congregational leadership then my life would have some meaning.

I do have to have a complete physical check-up before I can plan for anything. Yet I would like to hear if you are as enthusiastic over the idea as Mr. Kay (our president) tells me Rabbi Eisendrath is.

These clippings will interest you. We all forgot to list Bill's war time activities and he did give a great deal of himself to them—he was a chaplain in Pensacola during World War I & Civilian Chaplain here at Key Fie[l]d⁵ during World War II—he received many official commendations for his work here & really made an outstanding contribution.

I'm not quite up to letter writing so please forgive my errors & inconsistencies—write me when you can.

Most Sincerely,

Paula

Please thank Jo Schoenbrun, Rabbis Egelson⁶ and Zepin⁷ for me until I can do so formally.

Even in this first letter, so soon after her husband's death, in the midst of weighing the very personal costs and benefits of accepting this invitation, Ackerman understood the larger symbolic significance of her decision. By choosing to fill in for her husband at this small, southern temple, Ackerman would be taking a "revolutionary" stance, for her new role would open up the possibility of women serving as rabbis in the future.

In the second letter to Schwarz, written three weeks later, one already sees the impact of public opinion on Ackerman's thinking. First, she addresses those—including Schwarz—who question her qualifications for the position. In response, she invokes her *rebbetzin* credentials, reminding Schwarz that she and her husband had served the congregation together for twenty-seven years. Assuming the role of rabbi was the logical extension of the two-person rabbinate that she had shared with her husband in that community for more than two decades. Ackerman reminds Schwarz how Jewishly knowledgeable she is, chiding him for doubting her abilities since he was the rabbi who had confirmed her and she had worked in his religious school after confirmation. Though she concedes her limitations as a preacher, Ackerman challenges Schwarz to recommend books to help her better prepare. Ackerman worries about the adequacy of her rudimentary Hebrew knowledge, but she recognizes that what congregants most want is for her to speak from her heart.

Second, Ackerman underplays her role. Even though she had acknowledged in her earlier letter that taking over as rabbi would have huge symbolic significance, in this letter, in response to criticism, Ackerman mutes the importance of her decision, emphasizing that she is only considering this on an interim basis, "until they can find a suitable Rabbi," and that she is not embarking on a new career. This gendered response serves to downplay the importance of her decision without overturning it.

Third, Ackerman explains her very pragmatic reasons for taking on the role. From the congregation's perspective, she knew how difficult it would be to find a qualified rabbi for such a small congregation. From a personal standpoint, Ackerman lived in a parsonage. Unless she became the rabbi, she would need to find a new place to live. By taking over the pulpit, Ackerman and the congregation both stood to gain a sense of security. She admits that it would also be emotionally beneficial, for it would keep her "so beautifully occupied at the time I need it most."

Fourth, Ackerman strengthens her arguments in favor of accepting the position by pointing to the positive reception garnered from the gentile community. She notes the "enthusiastic" support of the non-Jewish population and the fact that the state of Mississippi would recognize her as a legal officiant at weddings and funerals. For Jews living as a minority in a majority culture that they revered, invoking the endorsement of the non-Jewish world served to enhance one's legitimacy among one's fellow Jews.

Jan. 9, 1951

Dear Friend,⁸

Please forgive my long delay in answering your fine letter. I do want to thank you for presenting the picture to me so thoroughly—for taking the time to discuss it with me in such detail.

I agree with so much that you've said—yet there are some things that I feel you do not quite understand.

For one thing I have no idea or intention of embarking on a career at my age or state of health. There is no congregation in the whole country that I'd even consider serving as "Rabbi" except Meridian where Bill & I worked to-gether so happily for 27 years. The fact that they want me so whole-heartedly & unanimously (and the non-Jewish population is as enthusiastic) gives me the courage to try to lead them (and here's an important point) until they can find a suitable Rabbi.

For my part I'm considering it wholly on an interim basis. My interest in this congregation is such that if I felt it was slipping with me at the helm I'd quickly retire & insist that they find some-one. I know as well as they that it won't be easy to find the sort of man Bill was. Oh, I know there are some "misfits" available but they don't want that type. Nor can they offer enough, either in congregational activity or financial assets to make this pulpit attractive to the right man.

Do you know how many children we have in our Religious School? Sixteen! Do you think that will present a problem too big for me to handle? Especially after I've done it since you confirmed me! As for the Youth activities that you say takes trained leadership. It does—but our problem here is that we have no youth.

As for the sermons—I don't intend to preach philosophy or higher criticism of the Bible—they've asked me merely to give them some of the faith I have in my own heart—the Jewish way of life that I've lived every day of my life—that shouldn't be too hard. Bill has a wonderful library which I intend to give to the congregation as a memorial to him. Perhaps you too can help me out with available subject material—I know there's plenty.

I'm wondering too, if there isn't a little book of ethical stories or Talmud Tales suitable for little talks to the Sabbath School. If there is tell me about it. Or any thing else you have to suggest.

As for marriages & funerals—well the State of Mississippi will let me do them legally. I shall however, make it known to the Congregation that if they wish the services of a neighboring Rabbi for such occasions I would welcome them freely.

The thing that worries me most is my very meagre knowledge of Hebrew—you know how little I know—I can read the Services—have done it many times but the Torah is another thing. They don't seem to want too much Hebrew—I rather think we'll be able to work something out there too, for the time being.

If I can carry on here for a few months it would be so wonderful for me. With Mama's condition so precarious it means much to me to continue on here in this home which is a parsonage you know. As for my own state of mind I know of nothing that could keep me so beautifully occupied at the time I need it most. So pray with me and for me that God will give me the powers equal to the task. I shall need His blessings and His gifts sublime. I truly feel that it is a call and that like Samuel I must answer: "Here am I".

*Most sincerely,
Paula*

In his reply, Schwarz reassures Ackerman that he supports her decision and offers her concrete suggestions for sermon and story material. He also offers several options for how to conduct the Torah reading service.⁹ In Ackerman's third letter, below, she thanks him for his approval and suggestions, but she also reveals her anger at Eisendrath. He initially supported Ackerman's appointment but later publicly denied having done so. He claimed that the UAHC could not endorse her appointment because she had not been ordained as a rabbi. In a letter to the synagogue president, Eisendrath conceded that, as a rabbi's wife, Ackerman had the "opportunity and the privilege of being at his [her husband's] side for many years as a helpmate in every high sense." Yet he withdrew his endorsement because he worried about the ripple effect of her taking on a rabbinic role. Conflating the issue of gender with that of ordination, Eisendrath focused his disapproval on the fact that Ackerman was not a rabbi, but, of course, no woman could earn ordination at that time, guaranteeing that his opposition to lay leadership would also undermine the possibility of women serving as rabbis. In fact, his criticism did attack Ackerman's gender, even if not explicitly. Eisendrath noted that many rabbis' wives served with distinction, and he admitted concern that Ackerman's precedent might inspire other *rebbetzins* to emulate her. Ackerman's hurtful tone reflects her sense of betrayal, since she insists that she had already assured him that it was not her intention to call herself a rabbi, nor did she want or expect ordination or a career. Ackerman feels burdened by the weight of this decision, and she asks Schwarz to pray for her.¹⁰

Jan. 23, 1951

Dear Jake [Jacob D. Schwarz],¹¹

Thank you, dear friend, for your understanding letter of approval and for your helpful suggestions. I am sure you know how distasteful and distressing all this publicity is to me, particularly the news that has been so distorted and inaccurate. Yet, I sincerely feel that Dr. Eisendrath could have handled it very much better than he did. Some day I'll tell you all about it.

This much I want you to know now. Mr. Kay did not make one single move without consulting Eisendrath first. Before he spoke to me, he called Eisendrath, told him how members of the Congregation from every cross-section had, simultaneously with him, suggested my carrying on in Bill's place if it could be done—and Eisendrath told him he thought it a wonderful idea. He did mention the question of "qualifications"—Mr. Kay told him they were aware of my lack of formal training but they wanted me & felt I could satisfy their needs. He further asked Eisendrath to coin a title for me, since there didn't seem to be one that would fit.

It took me a full month to make a decision but we certainly did think we had Eisendrath's blessing as the enclosed letter indicates.

Again, before Mr. Kay released the publicity he called Eisendrath & asked for the signal to go ahead, saying he only wished to give it to the local paper one day ahead but if Eisendrath wished he could handle the Nat'l end. Because Eisendrath did give us the impression that he wanted the pioneering idea to take root.

Of course there were deplorable inaccuracies & I do regret whatever embarrassment they caused but I feel very much hurt that after Eisendrath called me & I assured him that it was not my intention to call myself a Rabbi—nor did I want or expect ordination—nor was I seeking a career etc. etc. yet he completely reversed his stand without any consideration whatsoever of my in[n]ate sincerity & humble desire to serve the cause of Judaism. Dr. Glueck¹² was very much more understanding & considerate of me and Dr. Goldenson¹³ wrote me a letter that I shall treasure all my life.

It makes me very, very humble to have our Congregation here as well as the entire non Jewish community—so confident that I can serve—so whole heartedly with me. I cannot help but feel that it is the Lord's doings and that He will somehow show me the way.

And of-course, tho' they haven't asked it of me, I feel it to be an interim service—I hope they can get a Rabbi soon.

Mr. Kay has told me of his conversations with Rabbi Egelson & Dr. Goldenson—if Dr. Goldenson can come for the installation I would indeed feel it a sacred consecration and I could courageously stand up against whatever criticism there was of my purest intentions.

I need your prayers tho' more than ever—

With warm greetings—

Most Sincerely,

Paula

I have already put May 2nd on my calendar.

Please send the enclosed letters back to me—the yellow copy was one Sydney wrote to help Eisendrath justify himself. The editorial I'm enclosing just to show you the non-Jewish reaction here.

Ackerman served as rabbi of Beth El Congregation in Meridian from January 1951 until September 1953. She later recalled this as three “wonderful years!” Nine years later, her childhood congregation in Pensacola invited her to serve for six months until the congregation could find a new rabbi, an experience that she also enjoyed. Thanks to her own words and to her sense of history, which led her both to preserve her letters and then donate them to the American Jewish Archives, we are able to glimpse the internal deliberations that led Ackerman to become the first American Jewish woman to take on the role of rabbi.

What can we learn from Ackerman’s experience? Do the letters indicate that the members of Beth El Congregation were a foresighted, progressive group who wanted to blaze a trail for Jewish women to the pulpit? According to Ackerman, the congregation as a whole seemed more open to the idea of female rabbinic leadership than the religious establishment as articulated by Eisendrath was, but it seemed driven more by pragmatic reasons than by feminist ones. These letters may tell us more about the challenges of small Jewish communities than they do about gender. We learn that the congregants wanted a religious leader who cared about them, and they were less concerned about the textual fluency or erudition—or gender—of their leader than they were about his/her dedication and commitment to Judaism and to their community.

As for Ackerman, we learn that she felt comfortable serving despite her inadequacies in Hebrew and in traditional texts, because she knew how relatively unimportant these qualities were for her congregants and how limited her job options were at the time. Yet while she remained focused on the practical, she never lost sight of the larger significance of service to her congregation. She understood that the motivations for religious leadership are both lofty and mundane and that the key to success as a congregational rabbi lies not in gender but rather in fostering relationships between the laity and the leader.

Despite the angst that she experienced at the time, Ackerman believed that God “called” her to serve. She also correctly perceived that her 1951 decision to fill in as rabbi would help pave the way for women’s ordination decades later. Thrust into the rabbinic role by life’s circumstances, Ackerman succeeded through her seriousness of purpose, courage, talent, and perseverance in providing a model of inspiring religious leadership for rabbis—both male and female—in generations to come.¹⁴

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Notes

¹Ellen M. Umansky, "Paula Ackerman: Reform's Lost Woman Rabbi," *Genesis* 2 (June/July, 1986): 18–20; biography, Paula Ackerman, nearprint file, American Jewish Archives (AJA), Cincinnati, Ohio; "Ackerman, Paula," in *Reform Judaism in America: A Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook*, ed. Kerry M. Olitzky, Lance J. Sussman, and Malcolm H. Stern (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 1–2; and Pamela S. Nadell, *Women Who Would Be Rabbis: A History of Women's Ordination, 1889–1985* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 120.

²Umansky, "Paula Ackerman," 18–19.

³Paula Ackerman to friend, 12 December 1950; "Ackerman, Paula," correspondence file, SC-68, AJA.

⁴Rabbi Maurice N. Eisendrath (1902–1973) served as the executive director and president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) from 1943 to 1973.

⁵Key Field, Mississippi, is home to the Air National Guard 186th Air Refueling Wing.

⁶Louis L. Egelson (1885–1957) served as assistant director of the Department of Synagogue and School Extension at the UAHC.

⁷George Zepin (1878–1963), ordained in 1900 at Hebrew Union College (HUC), served for decades in various positions at the UAHC, including field secretary, secretary, and director of the Department of Synagogue and School Extension. He also served for several years as executive secretary of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods and the National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods. In 1941, Zepin became honorary secretary of the UAHC as well as secretary of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations–Central Conference of American Rabbis Joint Committee on Rabbinical Pensions.

⁸Paula Ackerman to friend, 9 January 1951; "Ackerman, Paula," correspondence file, SC-68, AJA.

⁹Jacob D. Schwarz to Paula Ackerman, 17 January 1951, "Ackerman, Paula," correspondence file, SC-68, AJA.

¹⁰"Rabbi Maurice N. Eisendrath Denies Approving Appointment of Woman Rabbi," press release; and [Maurice N. Eisendrath?] to Sidney S. Kay, 30 January 1951, "Ackerman, Paula," correspondence file, SC-68, AJA.

¹¹Paula Ackerman to Jacob D. Schwarz, 23 Jan. 1951, "Ackerman, Paula," correspondence file, SC-68, AJA.

¹²Nelson Glueck (1900–1971) served as president of HUC from 1947 to 1971.

¹³Samuel Harry Goldenson (1878–1962) served as senior rabbi of Temple Emanu-El, New York City, from 1934 to 1947 and as president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) from 1933 to 1935. Becoming rabbi emeritus in 1947, he devoted the last years of his career to preaching in small communities under the auspices of the UAHC.

¹⁴"Ackerman, Paula," *Reform Judaism*, 1–2; Meridian, Mississippi, Temple Beth Israel minutes and miscellaneous material relating to the activities of Rabbi and Mrs. William Ackerman, microfilm #2041, AJA; Ackerman to Jacob Rader Marcus, 24 April 1979, "Ackerman, Paula," correspondence file, SC-68, AJA; Nadell, *Women*, 124; and Umansky, "Paula Ackerman," 20.