HUC and American Jewish Archives Honors Sally Priesand with Year Long Exhibit

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Thursday, May 19 marked the opening of the AJA’s year long exhibit on Rabbi Sally Priesand, the first female rabbi to be ordained at a seminary. The opening coincides with Rabbi Sally’s ordination on June 3, 1972.

The exhibit features artifacts from Sally’s life, ranging from childhood notes and photographs to a Rabbi Sally trading card, as well as some of her own paintings and photography. Of particular interest are letters exchanged between Rabbi Sally and various administrators at HUC, dating to the 1963, when Sally was applying to HUC’s rabbinical school. Sally was just sixteen years old when she wrote to the Reform Jewish movement’s flagship seminary indicating her desire to become a rabbi. The letters show that the school warned Sally that no woman had yet been ordained and that those that applied tended to lean more toward the study of Jewish education. But, as the exhibit clearly shows, Sally persisted.

The various phases of the exhibit match the phases of Sally’s life and stretch from her childhood, her time at HUC, her life as a newly ordained rabbi, and her broader impact on the rabbinate. Since Sally’s ordination fifty years ago this month, more than twelve hundred women have become rabbis across all denominations of Judaism. As the exhibit claims, Sally opened the door for these women and, like all good teachers, continues to hold it open for generations of women rabbis to follow her.

During her keynote speech, Sally reminisced on her time at HUC, especially focusing on former HUC president Dr. Nelson Glueck who played a key role in her acceptance into HUC and who had been looking forward to ordaining her. Dr. Glueck passed away in 1971, a little over a year before Rabbi Sally would be ordained. A letter from Dr. Helen Glueck, Nelson Glueck’s wife, written after his death, features in the exhibit.

The exhibit will be open for a year. It will also be available digitally for those unable to travel to Cincinnati.