

## Women-Rabbi Fiction in the 21st Century: An Update

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### Article abstract

Women rabbis have been depicted in fiction for close to fifty years. In the second decade and then in the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century over a dozen fictional women rabbis appear as central or important characters in novels, short stories, and on the silver screen. Most of them make their first appearance. This article takes note of the authors of these works, and then looks at the characters themselves, contrasting their “fictional” experiences with the published experiences of “real-life” women rabbis. It discusses these fictional women rabbis in terms of their theology/sense of tradition; religious/educational backgrounds; gender identification; and where that information is dealt with in the storyline, how these women address some of the challenges facing women rabbis such as dressed for success; pay inequity; and matters of sexual harassment. This is followed by a section on how women regard success in the rabbinate. A caveat: the real-lived experiences of women rabbis, their definitions of success and their joys/concerns/issues/disquiets are not necessarily the subjects that concern writers of fiction that feature women rabbis as characters.

## Women-Rabbi Fiction in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: An Update

David J. Zucker, Aurora, Colorado, USA

### Abstract

Women rabbis have been depicted in fiction for close to fifty years. In the second decade and then in the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century over a dozen fictional women rabbis appear as central or important characters in novels, short stories, and on the silver screen. Most of them make their first appearance. This article takes note of the authors of these works, and then looks at the characters themselves, contrasting their “fictional” experiences with the published experiences of “real-life” women rabbis. It discusses these fictional women rabbis in terms of their theology/sense of tradition; religious/educational backgrounds; gender identification; and where that information is dealt with in the storyline, how these women address some of the challenges facing women rabbis such as dressed for success; pay inequity; and matters of sexual harassment. This is followed by a section on how women regard success in the rabbinate. A caveat: the real-lived experiences of women rabbis, their definitions of success and their joys/concerns/issues/disquiets are not necessarily the subjects that concern writers of fiction that feature women rabbis as characters.

In the second decade and then in the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century over a dozen fictional women rabbis appear as central or important characters in novels, short stories, and on the silver screen. Most of them make their first appearance.<sup>1</sup> They often lead congregations, some in a solo position, others as the Assistant or Associate Rabbi.<sup>2</sup> Three are chaplains: one at a senior center, one in the military, and the third for a time is a chaplain at a girls’ camp (Raquel Fein, *Transparent*). Still another, more difficult to describe rabbi, appears in the dystopian series, “The Handmaid’s Tale,” Rabbi Sally as an Unwoman.

This article begins by noting the authors of these works, and then looks at the characters themselves, contrasting their “fictional” experiences with the published experiences of “real-life” women<sup>3</sup> rabbis. It discusses these fictional women in terms of their theology/sense of tradition; religious/educational backgrounds; gender identification; and where that information is dealt with in the storyline, how these women address some of the challenges facing women rabbis such as dressed for success; pay inequity; and matters of sexual harassment. This is followed by a section on how women regard success in the rabbinate.

A caveat: the real-lived experiences of women rabbis, their definitions of success and their joys/concerns/questions/disquiets are not necessarily the subjects that concern writers of fiction that feature women rabbis as characters. For example, the subjects of pay equity with male rabbis,

or finding a proper balance between their professional and private lives is an ongoing concern for many real-life women rabbis. These subjects are only rarely dealt with in the women-rabbi-fiction literature. Further, literary works do not need to be scientifically, sociologically, or statistically accurate. Fiction writers often write to entertain, as opposed to necessarily dealing with real-life matters. In addition, fiction usually presents a snapshot or brief description of a particular event, presentation of the full context being virtually impossible. Authors also often choose to set their characters in dramatic (and sometimes melodramatic) situations.

### **The Authors**

As best I know, seven of the authors are women (Ilene Schneider, Racelle Rosett [Schaefer], Aimee Bender, Marcia R. Rudin, Kira Snyder, Catherine deCuir, and Rachel Sharona Lewis); seven are men (Philip Graubart, Michael Chabon, Mark Leslie Shook, Roger Herst, Seth B. Goldsmith, Bruce Miller, and Robert Schoen), and two, Sheyna Galyan and Joey Soloway self-classify as non-binary.<sup>4</sup> Graubart is a Conservative rabbi; Herst and Shook are Reform rabbis; Schneider is a Reconstructionist rabbi, and the sixth woman rabbi ordained in the United States; Rudin is at once the wife, mother of a woman rabbi, and mother-in-law, of a male rabbi. Goldsmith's career was in healthcare and academia; Schoen is a retired optometrist and also a musician; deCuir is a cantorial soloist and jazz vocalist; Miller is a writer and producer, as is Snyder; Chabon and Bender are full-time fiction authors; Lewis is a community organizer; Soloway an award-winning TV director; and Galyan an author.<sup>5</sup>

Featuring fictional women rabbis as central or important figures is a new phenomenon. The first fictional woman rabbi appears in Rabbi Herbert Tarr's *So Help Me God!* (1979). Isaca Zion is in a minor role, primarily as a rabbinic student. At the close of the novel, she is ordained in 1974. Zion is the sole woman in her class, and she expects to be the "second woman rabbi in history."<sup>6</sup> Since Tarr's novel, close to five decades ago, several fiction writers feature women rabbis as important, if not always central characters. Women rabbis also appear on the silver screen.<sup>7</sup> This article, however, addresses more recent fiction.

### **The Characters**

**Rabbi Yael Gold:** *Rabbis and Gangsters; Women and God* by Philip Graubart.

In the mystery novel *Rabbis and Gangsters*, Yael Gold is the Assistant Rabbi at a congregation. In the sequel *Women and God*, it explains that the synagogue is a few miles from Las Vegas, Nevada. About thirty years old, she is married without children. By the close of the first novel her senior rabbi has resigned, in large part because his ongoing philandering (“we have an open marriage”) has come to light. His departure is connected with the fact that his wife has been murdered. For a time, he is an active suspect, and is even brought to trial. While the police do the major sleuthing in terms of the murder, Rabbi Gold uncovers hidden secrets about her family, and her connection to the person who turns out to be the guilty party, a disgruntled, quite unsavory, early retired cantor. The second novel, *Women and God*, does not deal with Rabbi Gold as a congregational rabbi. Rather, it is situated in New York, at a very thinly disguised description of the Conservative movement’s Jewish Theological Seminary, in the novel called the Hebrew Theological Institute. It centers on Rabbi Gold who is invited by the President of the Rabbinical Assembly (the Conservative movement’s professional body), to investigate allegations of sexual misconduct labeled at a tenured professor, Rabbi (“Reb”) Moishe Weinstein, an equally thinly disguised character based on the life of the immensely popular, but flawed charismatic musician-outrreach figure Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach.<sup>8</sup> The real-life factual story concerning inappropriate sexual behavior, however does not point to JTS, but rather to the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. As explained in 2021 in an official communique by the President of the Board and the President of HUC-JIR, a “report provided to us by [the investigating law firm] Morgan Lewis recounts serious and credible allegations of gender and other forms of discrimination, sexual harassment, favoritism, intolerance, and disrespect occurring over decades.” Further, it explains that “administrative leadership failed to prevent or respond comprehensively to that behavior.”<sup>9, 10</sup>

**Rabbi Aviva Cohen:** *Chanukah Guilt; Unleavened Dead; Yom Killer* by Ilene Schneider.

Rabbi Aviva Cohen is the protagonist of three rabbi-as-sleuth novels. She first appears in *Chanukah Guilt* followed by *Unleavened Dead*, and then *Yom Killer*. A fourth novel, *Killa Megilla* is forthcoming. Fictional Aviva Cohen like her creator was one of the first cohort of women rabbis. Now, about twenty-five years on, she leads a small, somewhat traditional-leaning congregation in a town in southern New Jersey, not too far from Philadelphia. Though it is not specifically stated so, the novels infer that she, like the author, is a graduate of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical

College. She is twice divorced, and childless. Her first husband, now remarried, ends up as Director of Public Safety, akin to the Chief of Police in Rabbi Cohen's community as well as his teaching in the area of law enforcement at a local university. She and her first husband have an amicable relationship. Coincidentally, at the end of the third novel, *Yom Killer*, after several years following the serious illness and then the death of his second wife, Cohen and her former husband, decide to become engaged once again. Aviva is a kind of latter-day Miss Marple of Agatha Christie fame, and there are allusions to this connection in each of the novels.<sup>11</sup> She self-describes as someone who is very intuitive and quite curious. She knows how to read the clues around her. Similar to G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown, Aviva uses her knowledge as a rabbi-counselor in order to gain information from people. In her blog, author Schneider writes:

I sometimes wonder if the plots of my books could still be written in the same way if Rabbi Aviva Cohen were Father Sean Donohue or a college professor or a supermarket cashier, if the setting were a Puritan town in Vermont or in the Midwest. It might be difficult — after all, people don't confide in a supermarket cashier the way they do in a rabbi — but, yes, with modifications, the basic plots could be the same even if there were no Jews among the characters.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, these plots do center on Rabbi Cohen, and many of the persons in her novels, virtuous and not, are Jewish. Rabbi Cohen's profession often changes the dynamic of how she interacts with and is perceived by other characters in the novels.

**Rabbi Rebecca Teplitz:** "Citizen Conn" by Michael Chabon.

In this short story by Pulitzer award-winning writer Chabon, Rebecca Teplitz is a chaplain at a senior center. The two main characters relate to her their mutual history and the reasons for their ongoing decades-long quarrel.

**Rabbi Beth Rosen:** *Moving Waters* by Racelle Rosett.

Episodes involving Rabbi Beth Rosen appear in several of the chapters in this book of short stories. One sees her interacting with her Senior Rabbi at Temple Israel of Hollywood [TioH], and then doing some pastoral counseling. At one point the author mentions that Rabbi Rosen appeared in two television series, *Grey's Anatomy* and *Six Feet Under*, and that she has a Screen Actors Guild card. Coincidentally, real-life Rabbi Michelle Missaghieh who is the Associate Rabbi at TioH did have a rabbinic role in *Grey's Anatomy*, but it was actor Molly Parker who was in the latter series.

It is mentioned that Rabbi Rosen has taken a Confirmation class trip to Israel. She is portrayed as being in the early stages of her pregnancy.

**Rabbi Batya Zahav:** *Destined to Choose; Strength to Stand* by Sheyna Galyan.

Rabbi Batya Zahav, in her mid-thirties, is a secondary character in these two mystery novels. She leads a medium-sized Reform congregation in the Minneapolis-St Paul area. She is good friends with the lead character, Rabbi David Cohen, who is the rabbi at a local Conservative congregation. In the second novel, Rabbi Zahav is the intended target of what appears to be a hate crime.

**Chaplain Abby Stone:** *The Ezra Scroll* by Mark Leslie Shook.

Chaplain Lt. J.G. Abby Stone serves in the U.S. Navy aboard an aircraft carrier based in the Mediterranean Sea. She is about thirty years old. The storyline is framed as a mystery. Her story begins aboard the carrier and then moves for a week or so to locations in Israel.

**Unnamed Rabbi:** “The Doctor and the Rabbi” by Aimee Bender.

This is a “short but intense story about the modern interplay of faith and reason, and it moves quickly to the heart of the matter, from the doctor’s doubt to the rabbi’s dependence on his care. Its two characters remain unnamed, at once specific and universal, a rationalist doctor and his fiercely patient rabbi struggling with the eternal questions of doubt, belief, mercy, and love.”<sup>13</sup>

**Rabbi Raquel Fein:** *Transparent* by Joey Soloway.

Rabbi Raquel Fein (actor Kathryn Hahn) is undoubtedly, simply because of the millions of people who have seen this series, the most famous fictional contemporary woman rabbi. She appears as a major, although secondary figure in the multi-award-winning TV series, *Transparent*. She leads a small congregation located somewhere in Los Angeles. For a good part of the series, Rabbi Fein is living with and engaged to Josh Pfefferman who is the son of the male lead, Mort (Maura) Pfefferman. Maura is transitioning from male to female. Josh’s mother Shelly belongs to Rabbi Fein’s congregation. At one point Rabbi Fein has a miscarriage. In the closing episodes she has left her congregation and is working as a chaplain at a Jewish girls’ camp. “Millions of people got to share the experience of a rabbi drafting a sermon owing to the fact that Rabbi Raquel Fein is a beloved character on the award-winning series *Transparent*. Played with exquisite sensitivity and nuance by Kathryn Hahn, she is both groundbreaking and relatable, not only because of her gender but also because of her marital status. Like many of her real-life counterparts, Rabbi Raquel is

professional, intelligent, accomplished, attractive, empathetic, grounded, grown-up, caring, complex, loving. And single.”<sup>14, 15</sup>

**Rabbi Gabrielle Lewyn:** *Rabbi Gabrielle’s Scandal; A Kiss for Rabbi Gabrielle; Rabbi Gabrielle’s Defiance; Rabbi Gabrielle Commits a Felony* by Roger Herst.

Rabbi Gabrielle (Gabby) Lewyn is the senior rabbi at a very large and prominent congregation in Washington, D.C. In the first novel, which is a slightly rewritten version of the earlier work titled, *Woman of the Cloth*, she is thirty-three and unmarried. By the fourth novel, at age thirty-seven she is married to Kye Chung who has converted to Judaism. In the first novel, she has been at Congregation Ohav Shalom for about six years. The Rabbi Gabby series are written as mystery/crime novels as well as reflecting the inner politics of congregational life.

**Rabbi Chani Kahn:** *The Rabbi of Resurrection Bay; The Rabbi’s Holocaust Heroes Museum* by Seth B. Goldsmith.

Rabbi Chani Kahn is probably in her later thirties in *The Rabbi of Resurrection Bay* and over a dozen years older in *The Rabbi’s Holocaust Heroes Museum*. On a part-time basis she leads a small, but thriving non-affiliated congregation in Seward, Alaska. She is ordained through the fictional Klal Yisrael Yeshiva in Brookline, Massachusetts (a pseudonym for Hebrew College in Newton, Massachusetts.)<sup>16</sup> This is a second career for Kahn; she had earned an MSW prior to her rabbinic studies. In the first novel she is widowed without children, in the second novel she is married to a very successful doctor, and they have twin rising-teenage girls. Whereas Cohen’s small congregation pays her a minimal salary,<sup>17</sup> Kahn is independently wealthy, and does not depend on the congregation for her livelihood. If Aviva Cohen is in the image of Miss Marple, Chani Kahn is more in the image of a human superhero. She is incredibly athletic, she flies her own multi-passenger plane, she visits small Jewish communities in Alaska via that plane, and she also is a part-time chaplain at a local prison. In addition, she is an active participant within the Seward Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) team. In the second novel she spearheads the creation of a Holocaust Heroes Museum in Seward.

**Rabbi Sandra Miller-Brownstein:** *Hear My Voice* by Marcia R. Rudin.

This novel follows the life and career choices of Sandra Miller-Brownstein from her early years in Illinois in the mid-1940s until 1990. Reared and nurtured in a Reform Jewish setting, she like

Rabbi Aviva Cohen, is among the first wave of women rabbis. She enters Hebrew Union College in 1972, the year that Sally J. Priesand was ordained. Like Chani Kahn, Sandra Miller-Brownstein earns an MSW before attending rabbinical school. The novel traces her rabbinic career through her seminary years, her first position as an Assistant Rabbi, and then her solo position at a medium-sized congregation in the Chicago area. *Hear My Voice* is unique in that her fictionalized characters do interact with real-life figures, and consciously reflect actual changes in the perceptions about and careers of women rabbis.<sup>18</sup>

**Rabbi Sally:** “Seeds,” *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Bruce Miller and Kira Snyder.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* is a dystopian TV drama, based on the 1985 novel by Canadian author Margaret Atwood. In the second season set in present time, Rabbi Sally as an Unwoman presides over the wedding of two of the characters, Fiona and Kit. Kit is dying, and the wedding is to give them a moment of happiness before their chance at being together is taken away. Note: “Unwomen are the lowest social class of women in Gilead. It typically includes many if not all women who are incapable of social integration within the regime’s gender divisions. Among them are unmarried or divorced women, human rights activists, adulteresses, feminists, lesbians, female ‘gender traitors’, nuns, failed handmaids such as those unable to bear children after three two-year postings, female demonstrators/protesters, journalists, and other female dissidents.”<sup>19</sup>

**Rabbi Pearl Ross-Levy:** *The Rabbi Finds Her Way* by Robert Schoen and Catherine deCuir.

Rabbi Pearl Ross, who in the novel marries Assistant Professor Jack Levy is twenty-nine when she begins her career at fictional Lakeshore Temple in Oakland, California early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (clearly based on Temple Sinai in that city). She grew up in nearby Berkeley. Like Sandra Miller-Brownstein, Ross-Levy is reared in a Reform Jewish home, and in both cases while their parents belong to a Reform synagogue, they are not particularly active in congregational life. Both fathers, coincidentally professors at universities, are indifferent to ritual life.

**Rabbi Vivian Green:** *The Rabbi Who Prayed with Fire; The Rabbi Who Prayed for the City* by Rachel Sharona Lewis.

Rabbi Vivian Green is unique in that this is the first novel that *centers* on a woman who openly is a lesbian.<sup>20</sup> Rabbi Green, in the first novel is in her later twenties. She was ordained a year earlier by the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. She is the Assistant Rabbi at a Conservative



congregation in Providence, Rhode Island. In the next novel, she has been at the synagogue for seven years. The Senior is retiring, and she is elected to succeed him. She is married and she and her wife are actively seeking a sperm donor.

These fourteen women rabbis offer readers a wide variety of locales across the United States (the East Coast, Alaska, the Mid-West, and the West), and also in Israel. There are some similarities in ages, for Aviva Cohen, Chani Kahn, and Sandra Miller-Brownstein (at least towards the end of the novels) are in their fifties. Yael Gold, Beth Rosen, Batya Zahav, Abby Stone, Raquel Fein, Gabrielle Lewyn, Pearl Ross-Levy and Vivian Green are in their thirties. Lewyn leads a very large congregation, Cohen, Fein, and Kahn lead small congregations; Gold, Rosen, Miller-Brownstein, Ross-Levy, and Green work alongside a Senior Rabbi at a large congregation, although at the close of the novel Miller-Brownstein has her own, presumably medium-sized congregation.

These novels also offer a range of time when these women were ordained. Aviva Cohen is in the first wave of women rabbis as is Sandra Miller-Brownstein. Chani Kahn is ordained close to the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as is Pearl Ross-Levy. Vivian Green's ordination is about two decades later, towards the end of the second decade of this millennium. This range in these dates allows the authors to reflect on some of their experiences either at the seminaries or about the early cohorts of women rabbis. At one point Schneider's Aviva Cohen is at a rabbinic conference sharing stories with some of her female colleagues. It is a quarter century since she was ordained.

“It was a chance for us to air our grievances about the male elite that still controlled so much of Jewish life, even though women had been ordained for over a generation. Some of the current students hadn't even been born when the oldest of us were ordained and had never lived in a world without women rabbis. Things certainly were not as restrictive or sexist as they had been when I had been ordained in the mid-seventies.”<sup>21</sup>

Compare this to the fact that Pearl Ross-Levy recalls that when she was at HUC that her mentor was a female rabbi and professor who regularly would host a “group of five to ten female students a couple times a month ... The women would have tea and discuss the many issues a female rabbi might have to deal with. Typically, these were gender-specific: first period, pregnancy complications, miscarriage, as well as personal finance concerns for divorced or widowed women, or other personal problems congregants might feel more comfortable discussing with a female

rabbi—if they had a choice. [Ross-Levy nonetheless then goes on to relate that they] also discussed the sexism—or even misogyny—female rabbis might face in their job search, their congregations, or in their communities.”<sup>22</sup> At another point in the novel Ross-Levy remarks that she believed that in terms of the student body “half of the Reform rabbinical seminary is now female.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Theology/Tradition**

“Feminist activism profoundly reshaped Jewish ritual life in North America,” explains Mara H. Benjamin. “This same activity also decisively changed the landscape of Jewish God-talk in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.” Benjamin uses the term theology “to include systematic theological texts and a variety of non-systematic modalities that are characteristic of Jewish intellectual and theological production.” She goes on to write that, new “experiences of prayer ... emerged in feminist contexts, such as Rosh Hodesh [Chodesh] groups and women’s seders ... [and] new approaches to God-language.”<sup>24</sup> While this is so, these changes have limited expression in these fictional women-rabbi works.

A reference to new expressions of prayer is when as an Assistant Rabbi in Milwaukee, Sandra Miller-Brownstein (*Hear My Voice*) introduces the concept of a Rosh Chodesh group to her congregation. “Sandy introduced her feminism gradually ... [she] pointed out how the language of prayer forms our concept of God and defines women. [She explained that we] ‘know of course, that God is neither male nor female. But because God has always been assigned the attributes of a powerful and often stern male – father, king, lord, etc.’ [She continues,] ‘In order to correct this, we now want to use feminine pronouns when we talk about God. Not that God is a she, anymore than God is a he.’”<sup>25</sup> Later when she has her own solo congregation, “most of the congregants seemed amenable to Sandy’s feminist perspective. The women eagerly came to the *Rosh Chodesh* group she started. They devised feminist Seders. Sandy initiated support groups for women with miscarriages and other birth losses, menopause, divorces, and bereavement issues.” That statement about God being beyond gender said, there is a kind of internal inconsistency in the novel. One learns that in time Rabbi Miller-Brownstein refers to God with a masculine pronoun. As the novel explains, “she somehow felt herself developing a more personal relationship with *Him*.” In a conversation she explains that at times she feels that she “can somehow hear *His* voice” (my emphases).<sup>26</sup>

To a greater or lesser extent, the authors of these novels share something about the theology of their rabbis, and their thoughts about the importance of relating to traditional teachings.

When asked by the man who in time will become her husband, if she believes in God, Sandra Miller (*Hear My Voice*) explains, “I don’t know. I think about it a lot. I don’t *not* believe in God. I don’t think that it’s necessary for a rabbi or for any Jew. You have to act as *if* you believe in God. It is how you act, not about what you believe. It’s about transmitting Judaism to the next generation. Keeping it alive. Making the world a better place” (emphases in original).<sup>27</sup>

In Roger Hirst’s novel, *Rabbi Gabrielle’s Scandal*, Rabbi Lewyn explains that her God-concept is more a philosophic one than a personal being. Comparing herself to her predecessor, she states that while he “is a Theist ... I am a Deist. He conceives of God as an omnipotent judge, and I as remote cause. His notion leads to personal relationships; mine, to philosophical concepts.”<sup>28</sup>

A different take on God appears in the short story, “The Doctor and the Rabbi.” The doctor, who would like to believe, but struggles with his concepts of God wonders if it is even fair for him to pray. God surely has so many more worthy petitioners. “I don’t want to take up someone else’s space in line with my half-assed, half-believing, baloney prayer.” The rabbi explains that Judaism views prayer differently from the way that the physician has spoken. She says, in “Judaism we pray for a variety of reasons ... Out of gratitude. Out of despair, asking for comfort. Out of confusion. Out of anger, in defiance. To be with. To share oneself. Not for results, tangible material results ...”. She offers as a metaphor that millions of people can see the moon at night, “You just see it” and it has nothing to do with the person to your right or left, “You just see it. It’s there.”<sup>29</sup> God just hears your prayers, perhaps even because of or through the wrestling with the question.

Pearl Ross-Levy (*Rabbi Finds*) learns about the depth of faith from her closest friend, a Roman Catholic woman. She “taught me about faith, and belief, and courage ... It was like she had God all to herself, and God gave her courage, and strength, and fortitude. And I said to myself, *Hey, I want to feel that*. And after a while I did. And then I learned more about what God means to me, and that God is different for each person.” She also mentions in passing that “lots of rabbis ... have questioned their belief in God. I don’t hold that against them. Or anyone. It’s a very personal thing” (emphases in original)<sup>30</sup> Ross-Levy’s remarks echo some of the dialogue spoken by Rabbi David Small, the protagonist of Harry Kemelman’s rabbi-sleuth series which began with *Friday the*

*Rabbi Slept Late*. In one novel Small explains that belief in God is a difficult question to answer, because it depends on a number of variables when you ask if “I believe in God?” These variables include, do you mean the “I” of today, or yesterday, or of several years ago? He goes on to say that the word “believe” is another variable. [He then concludes with this statement:] “I suppose I have the feeling of belief and certainty some times and lack it at others.”<sup>31</sup> In another novel Small explains that people can walk in God’s ways and still have doubts about God’s existence. “After all, you can’t always control your thoughts.” Further, he says, faith “is not a requirement of our religion . . . I suspect it’s a kind of special talent that some have to a greater degree than others.”<sup>32</sup> Chani Kahn (*Resurrection Bay*) describes the religious services she conducts as “a stepping stone toward a life of positive behavior that focuses on making this a better world. The time to pray is the time to rally our community to be better, stronger, and kinder people.” Rabbi Kahn grew up in a Modern Orthodox congregation in the Fort Lauderdale, Florida area, but she has rejected that stance because she wants women to be treated equally as men. Rabbi Kahn says clearly, “I’m a liberal and I want to be part of an active Jewish community that is egalitarian and open to the lesbian and gays.” For her, studying about Judaism, and getting her congregation to do likewise, is paramount. She describes her approach as “an open-door policy and a very big tent . . . a new age blend of tradition and change. Clearly, it’s a work in progress.”<sup>33</sup> The character Vivian Green (*Rabbi Who Prayed*) would definitely echo those thoughts.

Seeing and understanding God as a loving, warm, caring, nurturing non-patriarchal deity is part of the teaching of Reb Moishe, the Shlomo Carlebach figure in Graubart’s *Women and God*. Rabbi Yael Gold, the protagonist of the novel reflects on how she “learned how to think about God from him [Reb Moishe], how to understand intimate relationships. How to pray, how to experience worship as something apart from and deeper than begging for life to go my way. He helped me develop a rabbinic voice . . . Apart from my parents, it was hard to imagine anyone with a deeper impact on my life.” At a later point Rabbi Gold self-describes as being “traditional . . . For me, it’s simple. God. Torah. Mitzvot.”<sup>34</sup>

Of the women rabbis discussed in these novels, Aviva Cohen (*Killer*) stands out in comparison to her colleagues, certainly in terms of her theological position. At one point a good friend who is also a woman rabbi turns to her and describes Rabbi Cohen as “an agnostic and a cynic.” Aviva

does not dispute that evaluation, but rather speaks of her “rationalistic approach” to the divine. She also replies,

Don't you ever feel as though you're acting, though? I know I do when I have to visit a particularly unpleasant congregant or ungrateful family. And I hate using platitudes, especially when someone is dying – she's going to a better place or he's at peace now – but it's what the families and patients want to hear. And even when they're ill but not dying and asking the “why me?” question, I feel so uncomfortable saying things like God does everything for a purpose, God has a plan, or God never gives us a heavier burden than we can carry. I wish I could say what I'm feeling – Hey, shit happens. There's no happily ever after in heaven. There's no retribution in hell. There's no heaven or hell. There's no reason for any of it. Sometimes, the best thing someone can say to a friend in pain – emotional, spiritual, physical – is, “When can I come over and do your laundry for you?”<sup>35</sup>

On another occasion Aviva in a moment of self-reflection speaks of herself as not being particularly spiritual. She defines her spirituality through a connection with the natural world – she is an avid birdwatcher – rather than with God. Still, she concedes that there is a sense of comfort in the mystery of ritual. Once a year, at the High Holydays, at Yom Kippur/the Day of Atonement she can give herself to it. She recognizes her “need to join a community in prayer, even if I look at prayer as the fulfillment of the psychological need humans have to give thanks or to give voice to their wishes rather than as homage to a deity. I was feeling a definite psychological need. Or maybe, if I were honest, a spiritual one, too.”<sup>36</sup>

### **Religious/educational Backgrounds**

These fourteen women rabbis come from a variety of religious backgrounds. As noted, Chani Kahn grew up in a Modern Orthodox congregation, however she did not attend a Jewish Day School, but rather a secular private school. She now regards herself, and her congregation, as non-denominational. Sandra Miller-Brownstein, Gabby Lewyn, Abby Stone and Pearl Ross-Levy grew up in Reform congregations, and they attended HUC-JIR; they are Reform rabbis. Vivian Green grew up in a Conservative congregation in Cincinnati and attended JTS in New York. Beth Rosen's father was a Conservative rabbi in Philadelphia, and she went to a Jewish Day School. Yael Gold's father was a Conservative rabbi in New Jersey and then Ohio. Aviva Cohen grew up in Mattapan, a suburb in the southern part of Boston, and her parents were nominal members of a synagogue.

### **Gender Identifications**

The LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning) community has gained broad acceptance in the late 20<sup>th</sup>, early 21<sup>st</sup> century Jewish America, explains the historian Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan. He writes of the “Sea Change in Attitudes Toward Gays and Lesbians.”<sup>37</sup> In

these recent fictional works, which feature women rabbis as central characters, many of the authors weave into the storyline matters of gender identification. The most prominent example is Joey Soloway's TV series, *Transparent*. In terms of novels the best examples are Lewis' *The Rabbi Who Prayed with Fire* and *The Rabbi Who Prayed for the City*. Prior to this, the foremost illustration was Joseph Telushkin's fictional character Rabbi Myra Wahl in the novel, *The Unorthodox Murder of Rabbi Wahl* (1987). As Wendy Zierler observed, "Telushkin decides to have Rabbi Wahl murdered early on in the novel, a plot detail that bespeaks a certain anxiety about the presence of women in the rabbinate, to say the least."<sup>38</sup> In Jonathan Rosen's 2004 novel, *Joy Comes in the Morning*, the sister of the protagonist woman rabbi, is a lesbian. There are but a handful of fictional gay rabbis.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, in terms of fiction focusing on rabbis, dealing with gender identifications is a fairly new phenomenon. Rachel Sharona Lewis' works are groundbreaking in their devoting some serious space to those who self-define as lesbians or trans. In the Schneider books a secondary but very important character is Rabbi Cohen's adult niece, Trudy. Trudy, who is a lesbian is the daughter of Aviva's considerably older sister Jean. Aviva fully supports her niece and her decisions. Referring to her sister Jean, Aviva thinks, that most "of her [Jean's] friends' children married non-Jews, but Trudy, a confirmed atheist, chose a Jewish woman. And sent her kids to my synagogue's religious school."<sup>40</sup> In the Rudin book one of the three protagonists, although not the rabbinic figure, enters into an intense lesbian relationship. Rabbi Pearl Ross-Levy's (Schoen and deCuir) younger sister Ruth is a lesbian. She and her partner have an important role in the novel. Rabbi Vivian Green (Lewis's protagonist) being a lesbian and her developing romance with another Jewish woman is an integral part of the first novel's plotline. By the follow-up novel she has been married to this woman for several years.

In the real world, explorations of gender orientation are widespread. In 2014 the CCAR Press published *The Sacred Encounter: Jewish Perspectives on Sexuality*, presenting dozens of essays and personal reflections. A recent edition (2021) of the *CCAR Journal/Reform Jewish Quarterly* features a major symposium specifically devoted to these matters. Titled "Gendered Judaism — Gender-Based Programs in Jewish Life" it divides into sections titled What is Gender? She, He, They: Finding Our Place Within the Spectrum; Gender-Based Programming in the Jewish Community; and A New Generation: Gender and Youth.<sup>41</sup> In one of the opening articles the author

points out that the “distinction between sex/gender and gender identity is premised on self-definition. Although the box checked on the birth certificate is thought to be consistent with a person’s gender identity, *the mechanism by which you define yourself is located between your ears*. A person’s sense of their gender identity (who they are) is a largely internal dynamic” (my emphases). When someone’s gender identity is mainly aligned with their sex/gender assigned at birth, they are defined as cisgender (see note 3 above). There are many people, however, “whose sex/gender assigned at birth doesn’t align with their gender identity [and they might ...] describe themselves as ‘transgender’ or ‘trans.’” There are trans people who embrace a gender binary, and those who do not. Some trans people self-describe as “‘nonbinary,’ ‘gender nonconforming,’ ‘gender fluid’ or by other terms ... In short, gender identity is how you define yourself, and a person’s gender identity may only be known by that individual, unless they tell you what it is.”<sup>42</sup> In these examples of recent woman-rabbi fiction we see several instances where the authors address the subject of lesbians and a lesbian rabbi. Nonetheless up to this point fiction which deals with woman rabbis as *central* characters, with but two exceptions have yet to broach the subject of people who self-identify as transgendered or gender-fluid. Likewise, I am unaware of fictional works centering on male rabbis addressing trans matters. I strongly suspect that in the years ahead, we shall see trans characters in fictional works which center on male, female, as well as non-binary rabbis.

In one instance, and this refers to a tangential character in Schoen and deCuir’s *The Rabbi Finds Her Way*, a chapter makes mention of a pre-teenage girl who begins to identify as a male, wearing male clothing and altering her hair style. Another teenage girl, Zinnia explains to her parents that “Allison had asked her and the other kids at Hebrew school to call her Allen.” When asked how she responded to this request, Zinnia remarks, “I said, ‘Sure, Allen. No problem.’”<sup>43</sup> At the very least this episode conveys the notion that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century this is a reasonably commonplace situation, and that it is not particularly remarkable for some youth. In Lewis’ *The Rabbi Who Prayed for the City*, a secondary character is trans, now as a male. He is married, although little of the storyline focuses on his being trans.

## Challenges Facing Women Rabbis

The fictional works considered in this article generally reflect life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nonetheless, it is primarily Rudin's and Schneider's works that deal with the matters of open discrimination against women rabbis. One example of this phenomenon is that of a layperson's resistance, that these women rabbis are somehow inappropriately working in a "man's world." That concern is most clearly addressed in Rudin's novel *Hear My Voice*. In the late 1970s, at a synagogue interview Sandra Miller-Brownstein is addressed by a woman on the search committee. The woman says, "I personally do not believe women should be rabbis ... It's just not in the normal scheme of things. We should be at home with our children .... cooking, cleaning." Rabbi Miller-Brownstein also is told that "even if [women] do succeed ... it will reflect poorly on the men rabbis ... [women rabbis are just] taking up the spot a man needs who'll have to support his family."<sup>44</sup> That sentiment was certainly present for several decades. The reality that women rabbis now are a standard feature in non-Orthodox Judaism, has mitigated against (at least in the public voicing of) such thoughts. In Schneider's *Yom Killer*, Aviva who was ordained in the mid 1970s thinks to herself, "I dislike being underestimated or having my opinions dismissed. As any woman who entered a male field when it was still unusual knows, it's an occupational hazard." At another point Aviva is praised that she "became a rabbi when women still aspired to be good wives and mothers and gourmet cooks."<sup>45</sup>

In Schoen and deCuir's novel, Rabbi Pearl Ross-Levy visits an obnoxious man at a prison. He attempts to intimidate her by saying, "Sorry lady. You're not what I'm looking for. I want a real rabbi. You can leave."<sup>46</sup> She handles this boorish behavior with aplomb, taking a firm hand, showing that she is in charge of the situation and putting the man successfully in his place.

Another matter faced by real-life and fictional rabbis is the balance between professional time and their private family lives. Sheyna Galyan deals with that tension, but it is framed in terms of the male-rabbi, not Batya Zahav. The most succinct expression of this dilemma appeared some years earlier in Erich Segal's novel, featuring Rabbi Deborah Luria, *Acts of Faith* (1992). "Almost by definition, a rabbi's duties are performed at abnormal hours. This was doubly difficult for a young single mother like herself . . . Deborah was conscientious and compassionate. She was dedicated.



And while these qualities were also necessary for the exercise of motherhood, she seemed invariably to fulfill the rabbi's duties, not the parent's."<sup>47</sup>

Where these women rabbis are married, there is no expectation that the husband will attend services or even other functions. In Galyan's *Strength to Stand*, Rabbi Batya Zahav's Israeli husband Arik rarely comes to services. His "dismissal of religious Judaism had approached legendary proportions among the board."<sup>48</sup> Robert Brownstein (*Hear My Voice*, Sandra's husband) "stopped coming to synagogue events, limiting his appearances to the High Holidays or family *Yahrzeits*. No one criticized him."<sup>49</sup> Kye Chung (*Gabrielle ... Felony*) complains to his wife, "Are you ever going to get a life for yourself Gabrielle? ... Everyone wants a piece of you. ... Ohav Shalom [her synagogue] is eating you up, morsel by morsel." Gabby subsequently acknowledges: "The truth is ... I love to be needed by others."<sup>50</sup> In *Transparent* Rabbi Raquel Fein's friend/fiancé Josh Pfefferman does not necessarily participate in synagogue activities.

### **"Dressed for success"**

Another challenge faced by women rabbis are the constant and continuing comments on what is, and what is not considered proper clothing. Rabbi Aviva Cohen speaks of her "one suit – charcoal gray... [her] 'professional' outfit." Sandra Miller-Brownstein is ordained in 1977. Prior to ordination there were frequent discussions among the women students as to what were or what were not proper styles and coloring: "They knew their physical appearance would be under constant scrutiny, especially when conducting [religious] services ... Their skirts needed to be longer than styles of the early 1970s dictated. They could never show their legs above the knees. Pantsuits were out ... No bright colors even in spring and summer. Suits, definitely. Brown. Navy blue. Grey. Black. Perhaps beige in warmer weather. Low chunky heels or flats."<sup>51</sup> A quarter century later, early in this millennium there are echoes of this kind of conservative self-selection in terms of proper dress. Pearl Ross-Levy chooses a fairly limited couture when she is in her role as rabbi. One day, when she is picking up her dry cleaning which consists of three "black pants suits ... one black suit with skirt ... five white blouses, two cream color blouses," she is asked if these outfits are required. Do they "make you wear the black suit and white blouse every day at your synagogue?" The rabbi answers, "Well, no, but it's more professional, don't you think?"<sup>52</sup> These matters do not seem to change. Indeed, in a novel published in 2020 and reflecting the

contemporary era, Rachel Sharona Lewis' Rabbi Vivian Green "was wearing a black pencil skirt and a dark-green silk blouse. She still had not mastered professional footwear and was self-conscious of her slip-on flats, slightly too delicate to fit into the image and personality she meant to convey."<sup>53</sup>

In *The Sacred Calling*, a real-life rabbi explains in the chapter titled "The Public Image of the Woman Rabbi" that women rabbis, unlike their male counterparts are frequently the recipients of advice concerning how they are dressed. "Congregants routinely [make] comments about their female rabbis' hairstyles, makeup (or lack thereof), nail polish, shoes, accessories, and overall clothing choices. It was, and continues to be, common for female rabbis to receive unsolicited style advice from congregants and male colleagues, often due to a perceived lack of a 'proper' style in the opinion of the person offering the advice"<sup>54</sup> By way of contrast, "Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, noted ... 'When I was a pulpit rabbi, no one ever commented on my hair, or whether I was wearing a new suit, or if I had worn the same tie last Shabbat.'"<sup>55</sup>

A related matter is that some of these fictional women rabbis actively comment on their physical weight. The Aviva Cohen books feature continuing self-deprecating remarks about how she opts for comfortable fitting clothes and that she is aware that she is overweight. She self-describes as "*this dumpy, middle-aged lady with the frizzy graying hair long overdue for a cut and color*" who contrasts with her former self, "*the petite, perky red-head with the sleek pixie cut from thirty years ago*" (emphases in original).<sup>56</sup> When Pearl Ross-Levy speaks to the Executive Director at her synagogue, she is aware that she "probably also had ten pounds on him, which did not make her happy. But it wasn't his fault. He wasn't the one who'd eaten the breakfast burrito. *And the bagel*" (emphases in original).<sup>57</sup>

### **Pay inequity**

Pay inequity remains a serious problem in the real-life rabbinate. Male rabbinic salaries continue to be more generous than those for females.<sup>58</sup> Rabbi Sandra Miller-Brownstein (*Hear My Voice*) is offered a position in Chicago. She explains, "I'm lucky to get a solo pulpit. Albeit ... at a lower salary than a man would get."<sup>59</sup>

The fictional women rabbis rarely speak about pay inequity. The reason is probably that lay writers

of fiction simply do not think about that phenomenon, so they do not feature it in the rabbi-women-stories. Nonetheless, at least some of the religious movements are beginning to address this more forcefully, for example through the CCAR's Task Force on the Experience of Women in the Rabbinate and the Reform Pay Equity Initiative.<sup>60</sup>

### **Sexual harassment**

“Women rabbis still face hurdles of misogyny.”<sup>61</sup> The issue of sexual harassment faced by women rabbis appears in Rudin's *Hear My Voice*. In that situation the synagogue president makes a pass at the woman rabbi which she immediately rebuffs. Then, instead of reporting this inappropriate behavior, upon the advice of a female colleague the rabbi takes “full advantage of the president's guilty secret” and uses it to her advantage by seeing that he convinces the board “to endorse most of the changes in the synagogue she introduced” including gender-neutral language.<sup>62</sup> In the Rabbi Aviva Cohen series, in the book set at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, she relates what happened to a female colleague, Wendy. When she had left her house for a ground-breaking ceremony for a new building, “the weather was nice, so she wore a lightweight suit and a thin blouse. By the time the ceremony started, it had clouded over and gotten chilly. She didn't realize it, but the cold wind popped out her nipples and they could be seen through her blouse. To make it worse, she didn't find out about it until the rabbi emeritus, the senior rabbi, and the synagogue president called her into a meeting this morning and chewed her out about her inappropriate attire and unprofessional demeanor!”<sup>63</sup> That matter would be unacceptable today, it would be actionable and have legal consequences.

These fictional instances reflect real-lived situations. “I've been harassed. It's happened to every female rabbi I know,” real-life Rabbi Rebecca Sirbu explains, “People have an overwhelming sense of discomfort with women rabbis, because they're women.” Sirbu is quoted in an article in *Lilith Magazine*. According to that article female rabbis face an additional burden of harassment because they are occupying a powerful position once permitted only to men.<sup>64</sup> Sometimes the harassment takes the form of an extra-long hug, at other times it is comments about how the woman appears. Woman rabbis often experience sentiments congruent with what is expressed in the #MeToo movement. “When the power invested in a rabbi is embodied by a woman, some people are still very uncomfortable with that and behave in ways that, consciously or unconsciously, are

efforts to reduce their power ... One way of doing that is to relate to her like a sex object instead of like a Jewish spiritual leader and teacher.”<sup>65</sup>

A recent article discloses what real-life women rabbis experience on a regular basis. Whether it is at a funeral, in the parking lot, or at a social gathering following services, women rabbis are subjected to such remarks as “I’ve always wanted to kiss a rabbi,” “If rabbis looked like you when I was a kid, I would have come to synagogue more,” “Rabbi, are you pregnant? Your shirt looks tighter,” or “Rabbi when you sit on the bimah, please make sure to close your legs or else I cannot stop thinking about what’s between them.”<sup>66</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the 2021 Morgan Lewis report about conduct at the Hebrew Union College “recounts serious and credible allegations of gender and other forms of discrimination, sexual harassment, favoritism, intolerance, and disrespect occurring over decades” which affected many rabbinical students.

### **Success in the Rabbinate**

These fourteen women rabbis broadly reflect the reality of women rabbis today. Many serve in congregations, but other fields are represented, notably chaplaincy. Do they regard themselves as “successful”? The shortest answer is yes. That seems to be true of nearly all of the rabbis (understanding that it is impossible to know that answer if the author does not write about it, and that it is difficult to gauge the sense of success of an Unwoman – “The Handmaid’s Tale.”) They appear to be happy in their professional choices. Are these women successful? They reflect recent studies of women rabbis. Undoubtedly definitions of “success” in the rabbinate have changed in the more than five decades since 1972. Fifty and probably forty, and perhaps thirty years ago, attainment in the rabbinate was equated with being the senior rabbi in a large congregation. That has changed. In a recent survey of women Rabbis in the Reform movement, it suggests that while “some rabbis did see success as attaining positions and compensation equal to their male rabbis, others felt that success didn’t necessarily mean bigger.” The article further explains that many “women rabbis spoke of success in relationship to family life and parenthood.”<sup>67</sup> In a 21<sup>st</sup> century national qualitative study of “What Matters Most to Women and Men”<sup>68</sup> the authors point out that the “predominant theme in women’s definitions of success for themselves was balance.” An additional “dominant theme was the importance of relationships (both at work and in their personal

lives.” The study also notes that only “a small minority mentioned money as part of their understanding of success.”<sup>69</sup>

### **Some Final Thoughts About the Woman-Rabbi Fiction**

These works – novels, short stories, the silver screen – which appear in the second and third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century feature fourteen women rabbis as major figures. These rabbis differ somewhat in age and professional experience. Most lead a congregation although the size of these synagogues’ family membership numbers differs from probably less than one hundred units, where the rabbi serves part-time, to several thousand family units with the character being the Senior Rabbi. The locales in most of these works stretch from coast to coast, literally from California to Rhode Island, and from Alaska to Florida. Some of these rabbis are recently ordained and others have a quarter century of rabbinic experience. Marcia R. Rudin’s *Hear My Voice* ends in 1990. Other works are set in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

When reading broadly in these works, it is clear that a number of authors value the rabbi as a pastoral presence. Aimee Bender’s short story, “The Doctor and the Rabbi” is a shining example of the rabbi in this role. Other examples can be found in Racelle Rosett’s *Moving Waters*, Michael Chabon’s “Citizen Conn,” and both of Rachel Sharona Lewis’ *Rabbi Who Prayed with Fire* and *the Rabbi Who Prayed for the city*. In Ilene Schneider’s *Yom Killer*, a woman rabbi explains to a colleague,

“I’ve worked with several hospice patients, and they taught me a lot about the strength of the human spirit. I never used to believe in a soul surviving the body, but I’ve seen and experienced things I never would have thought possible. People on the edge of death who stay alive until a beloved relative arrives. Ones who have a final burst of energy, and then die when alone, so their loved ones’ last memories are happy ones. It’s hard to explain, but witnessing those kinds of things did change me and my views. I’ve come to have an enormous amount of respect for the human spirit.”<sup>70</sup>

Her words reflect a statement in a work celebrating fifty years of women rabbis, namely that “a growing number of women rabbis have chosen to serve at the bedside, in long-term care facilities, in prisons, and in disasters, elevating the act of chaplaincy to a sacred art.”<sup>71</sup>

To a considerable extent it is the rabbi-authors (Graubart, Schneider, and Herst), or the author with close rabbinic connections (Rudin) who provide a greater insight into rabbinic life. It is Schneider, Rudin and Graubart who feature material where there is sexual harassment or inappropriate

behavior toward a female rabbi. It is two women authors, Schneider and Rudin who clearly address either criticism of the rabbi for not wearing appropriate clothing, or who joined by another female author, Rachel Sharona Lewis, point out that women rabbis make conscious choices as to their mode of dress. Likewise, it is women authors who mention the matter of pay-inequity. Many of the rabbi-authors write about the frictions that can exist between a rabbi and her (or for that matter, his) lay leadership. That said, stresses with her senior rabbi are part of the story in Graubart's *Rabbi and Gangsters*, and to a lesser extent for Beth Rosen (Rosset's *Moving Waters* and Lewis' two Rabbi Vivian Green novels.)

Many of the plotlines are fairly reasonable and believable, although a bit more dramatic than one would encounter under most circumstances. The career of Herst's Rabbi Gabby is the most improbable. Among other subplots even while leading a 3000-family member congregation, with but one Associate Rabbi, she makes/finds time to be a professional tennis player, uncovers an illicit guns-for-sale operation, is considered as a serious candidate for Congressional office, and agrees to transport radioactive materials from one state to another! That Rabbi Aviva faces and overcomes serious attempts on her life, and solves various crimes (murder, she wrote); those matters are expected; these are mystery novels. On the other hand, while Goldsmith's prose and dialogue are both readable and entertaining, the figures of Rabbi Chani Kahn and the man she will marry, Dr. Marc Cohn, are often drawn overdramatically and lack easy believability. In like manner, Schoen and deCuir's depiction of Rabbi Pearl Ross-Levy, while a very enjoyable read, the book lacks a certain credibility because she is near flawless in her roles both on the professional and personal level. She is depicted as caring and compassionate, witty and wise, always sensitive to other's needs. At the same time, she displays courage and conviction standing strong when a bully tries to intimidate her. The most down-to-earth work, one that is reflective of the reality of the rabbinate, is that of Marcia R. Rudin. To her credit, Rudin presents Rabbi Sandra Miller-Brownstein as a very human, and at times a flawed character. The year 2022 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the continuous ordination of women rabbis. Today worldwide over eighteen hundred rabbis have been ordained, primarily in the United States, but also in increasing numbers in Europe and Israel.

As noted at the beginning of this article, the real-lived experiences of women rabbis, their definitions of success and their joys/concerns/questions/disquiets are not necessarily the subjects

that concern writers of fiction that feature women rabbis as characters. A secondary consideration is that in several of the examples, the rabbi is involved in sleuthing or crime-detection, again not the lived experience of most rabbis, less likely women rabbis. The subjects of pay equity with male rabbis, or finding a proper balance between their professional and private lives is an ongoing matter for real-life women rabbis. These subjects are only rarely dealt with in the women-rabbi-fiction literature. Whether these subjects are not of interest to many of the authors, or the fiction writers choose to focus on different phenomena, or they have not researched properly what life is like in reality, the fact is that in most cases the stories about women rabbis focus on other matters. As mentioned in one of the novels, women today oftentimes form half of the graduating classes from the various seminaries. As time passes more women rabbis will likely be featured in fictional works. In addition to portraying them as pulpit rabbis, they will reflect the full spectrum of areas in which women rabbis are found, thereby offering an even more rounded picture of Jewish life in this century.

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Grateful thanks to Rabbi Rochelle Robins for reading an earlier version of this article and offering valuable insights.

If readers know of other recent women-rabbi-fiction examples, please share them with the author: DavidJ.Zucker@gmail.com. Thank you.

<sup>1</sup> **Yael Gold** in Philip Graubart, *Rabbis and Gangsters* (Holstein, ON: Exile, 2012), and *Women and God* (London, UK: Olympia, 2020); **Aviva Cohen** in Ilene Schneider, *Chanukah Guilt*, (Arlington, TX: Swimming Kangaroo, 2007); *Unleavened Dead*, Taylorville, IL: Oak Tree, 2012); *Yom Killer* (New York: Askenbaaken & Kent, 2016); *Killah Megilla* (forthcoming); **Rebecca Teplitz** in Michael Chabon, "Citizen Conn," <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/02/13/citizen-conn> (13 and 20 Feb 2012); **Beth Rosen** in Racelle Rosett, *Moving Waters*, (N.p.), 2012; **Batya Zahav** in Sheyna Galyan, *Destined to Choose*, (St Paul, MN: Yotzeret, 2013 (2003)); *Strength to Stand*, (St Paul, MN: Yotzeret, 2015); **Abby Stone** in Mark Leslie Shook, *The Ezra Scroll* (N.p. Lulu, 2013); **Unnamed character** in Aimee Bender, "The Doctor and the Rabbi," *The Color Master, Stories*, (New York: Anchor, 2014 (2013)); **Raquel Fein** in Jill (Joey) Soloway, *Transparent*, 2014-2019, TV series; **Gabrielle Lewyn** in Roger Herst, *Rabbi Gabrielle's Scandal*. (N.p.: Dale & Hill, 2016, revised version of *Woman of the Cloth*, 1998); *A Kiss for Rabbi Gabrielle*. (N.p.: Dale & Hill (2021); *Rabbi Gabrielle's Defiance*. (N.p.: Dale & Hill, 2014); *Rabbi Gabrielle Commits a Felony*. (N.p.: Dale Hill, 2014). There are several other books in the Rabbi Gabby series, but they are not situated in the United States. **Chani Kahn** in Seth B. Goldsmith, *The Rabbi of Resurrection Bay*, (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2016), *The Rabbi's Holocaust Heroes Museum* (N.p.), 2020; **Sandra Miller-Brownstein** in Marcia R. Rudin, *Hear My Voice*, (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2017); **Sally** in Bruce Miller and Kira Snyder, "Seeds," *The Handmaid's Tale*, TV series, Season 2, Episode 5, aired May 16, 2018; **Pearl Ross-Levy** in Robert Schoen and Catherine deCuir, *The Rabbi Finds Her Way*, (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge, 2019); **Vivian Green** in Rachel Sharona Lewis, *The Rabbi Who Prayed With Fire*, (N.p.: LadiesLadies Press, 2020); *The Rabbi Who Prayed for the City* (N.p.: LadiesLadies Press, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Women rabbis today are well integrated within the streams of Progressive Judaism. They lead congregations, head up or hold senior places in organizations, and are found in academic positions. For example, the Chief

Executive Officer and many of the senior posts at the Central Conference of American Rabbis [Reform] are women. At the Jewish Theological Seminary [Conservative] the Chancellor and the Director of the Cantorial School are women. The Executive Director of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association is a woman. In Britain both the former CEO of Liberal Judaism and the former Senior Rabbi to Reform Judaism, are women. The Principal of Leo Baeck College (London) is a woman. Women rabbis are also found within what is commonly termed Modern Orthodox Judaism, though there their presence is more muted. While still a rarity, there are Orthodox-ordained Women Rabbis. Rori Picker Neiss. “A New Reality: Female Religious Leadership in the Modern Orthodox Community.” In Rebecca Einstein Schorr, Alyssa M. Graf, Renee Edelman, eds., *The Sacred Calling: Four Decades of Women in the Rabbinate*, (New York: CCAR, 2016), [305-316]; see also Darren Kleinberg, “Orthodox Women (Non)-Rabbis.” In *The Sacred Calling* [317-337].

“At the opening plenary of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) conference in New York [in 2017] ... a speaker asked any woman holding or studying for Orthodox rabbinic ordination to stand up. Around 20 women rose to their feet — one rabbi, several ‘rabbas’ and many ‘Maharats’, which is short for *Manhigah Hilchatit Ruchanit Toranit*, or woman ‘leader of Jewish law, spirituality and Torah.’” Miriam Shaviv, “Orthodox women rabbis? It’s a certainty.”

<https://www.thejc.com/judaism/features/orthodox-women-rabbis-it-s-a-certainty-1.431524>.

See also: <https://www.thejc.com/lifestyle/features/dina-brawer-from-orthodox-rebbetzin-to-rabbi-1.461569>.

Women oftentimes form more than half of the graduating classes at the various institutions that ordain rabbis.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this article, I refer to the words “woman/women” rabbis to reflect the real lived experiences and fictional representations of cisgender women rabbis. “The term cisgender (from the Latin *cis-*, meaning ‘on the same side as’) can be used to describe individuals who possess, from birth and into adulthood... reproductive organs (sex) typical of the social category of man or woman (gender) to which that individual was assigned at birth.” (B. Aultman, “Cisgender,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1 (1-2): 61-62. (May 01, 2014). <https://read.dukeupress.edu/tsq/article/1/1-2/61/92020/Cisgender>). Nonetheless, for many, gender is more of an expression of self-identity than it is to biological or anatomical designations. See note 42 below.

My intention is not to exclude those women rabbis who identify as or are queer-gender or transgender or non-gender conforming or their lived experiences or fictional representations. By deploying the term “women rabbis”, I am also aware that the experiences of cisgender women rabbis are varied and complex, even more so for queer-, trans- or non-gender conforming women rabbis. This is both a limit and aim of this work: to contribute to the existing literature and debates about the representations of women rabbis in fiction as contrasted against their lived experiences and hope that queer and gender scholars are able to expand on and develop this area of scholarship. Furthermore, there may be cis-gender women rabbis who later choose a different designation.

<sup>4</sup> Galyan self-describes as an enby (non-binary) who uses they/them pronouns.

<https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B002I5TZ06/about>

Joey Soloway, who was previously known as Jill Soloway, identifies as nonbinary, uses the third-person pronoun (they/them/their), and lives in Los Angeles. <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/soloway-joey#:~:text=Soloway%2C%20who%20was%20previously%20known,and%20lives%20in%20Los%20Angeles>.

<sup>5</sup> Though they are laity, Sheyna Galyan, Seth B. Goldsmith, Robert Schoen and Catherine deCuir all acknowledge indebtedness to several rabbis for their help in writing their novels. Galyan, *Destined*, Acknowledgments; Goldsmith, *Resurrection Bay*, Acknowledgments, *Holocaust Heroes*; vii, Schoen and deCuir, 314-15. Non-Jewish actress Kathryn Hahn worked with real-life Rabbi Susan Goldberg.

<https://www.jta.org/2016/05/10/united-states/actress-kathryn-hahn-talks-about-playing-rabbi-raquel-on-transparent>



<sup>6</sup> Herbert Tarr, *So Help Me God!* (New York: Times Books, 1979), 57. Regina Jonas actually was the first woman in history to be ordained as a rabbi. Jonas was privately ordained by Rabbi Max Dienemann in Munich in 1935. She studied in Berlin at the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* (College of Jewish Studies). She practiced primarily in homes for the elderly. Jonas was murdered at Auschwitz in 1944.

<sup>7</sup> David J. Zucker, chapter 7, “Women Rabbis,” in *American Rabbis: Facts and Fiction, Second Edition*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019), 114-150; David J. Zucker, “Searching for the Fictional Rabbi on the Small and Large Screen.” In *The Sacred Calling*, 721—734; and David J. Zucker, “What’s the Story with ‘fictional’ Women Rabbis?” *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 2022, 18(1): 1-33.

<sup>8</sup> In the novel, the inappropriate sexual behavior is investigated in 2019. This date is twenty-five years following the 1994 death of Carlebach. In actual fact, Carlebach never served on the faculty of either JTS or HUC. Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 345-49. Sarah Blustain, “A Paradoxical Legacy: Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach’s Shadowy Side.” *Lilith* 23 (March 31, 1998): 10. Dana Evan Kaplan. *Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 283-84.

<sup>9</sup> <https://pr.huc.edu/email/2021/11/letter/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://huc.edu/about-huc/developing-a-sacred-respectful-community-at-huc-jir/sacred-respectful-community-progress-report/>

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<sup>11</sup> Schneider, *Chanukah*, 135; *Unleavened*, 191; *Killer*, 259.

<sup>12</sup> <https://rabbiauthor.com/2020/08/04/what-makes-a-jewish-book-jewish/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/aimce-benders-the-doctor-and-the-rabbi>

<sup>14</sup> <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/single-female-rabbi/>

<sup>15</sup> Fictional Rabbis Raquel Fein and Chaplain Abby Stone are exceptional among these fictional women rabbis in that it is clearly stated that they are single. Gabby Lewyn is single in the early novels, as is Vivian Green in the first novel. In all of the other cases, either they are married; their marital status is not mentioned; or as in the case of Schneider’s Aviva Cohen, she is divorced. In real life many women rabbis have never been married. See Elizabeth S. Wood, “Dropping the R-Bomb” in *The Sacred Calling*, 743-45; Emily H. Feigenson, “Female Rabbis and Delayed Childbearing” *CCAR Journal/Reform Jewish Quarterly*, Spring 1997, 75.

<sup>16</sup> Goldsmith, *Resurrection Bay*, 72, 221.

<sup>17</sup> Schneider, *Killer*, 198.

<sup>18</sup> Rudin, iii.

<sup>19</sup> <https://the-handmaids-tale.fandom.com/wiki/Unwoman>

<sup>20</sup> There is a lesbian rabbi in Joseph Telushkin’s novel, *The Unorthodox Murder of Rabbi Wahl*, (New Milford, CT: The Toby Press, 2004, but first published 1987). Rabbi Myra Wahl is murdered early in the novel.

- 21 Schneider, *Unleavened*, 37.
- 22 Schoen and deCuir, 54.
- 23 Schoen and deCuir, 262.
- 24 Mara H. Benjamin. "Tracing the Contours of a Half-Century of Jewish Feminist Theology." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*. 36:1 (2020), 11-12, 13-14 [11-31]. See Shira Stern. "The Expansion of 'Rabbi.'" *The First Fifty Years: A Jubilee in Prose and Poetry Honoring Women Rabbis*. Eds. Sue Levi Elwell, Jessica Greenbaum, Hara E. Person. (New York: CCAR, 2023), 32.
- 25 Rudin, 218-19.
- 26 Rudin, 257.
- 27 Rudin, 98.
- 28 Herst, *Rabbi Gabrielle – Scandal*, 74.
- 29 Aimee Bender. "The Doctor and the Rabbi," *The Color Master, Stories*, (New York: Anchor, 2014 (2013), 143-46.
- 30 Schoen and deCuir, 113-14.
- 31 Harry Kemelman, *Monday the Rabbi Took Off*. New York: Putnam's, 1972, 198.
- 32 Harry Kemelman, *Sunday the Rabbi Stayed Home*. New York: Putnam's Sons, 1969, 58.
- 33 Goldsmith, *Resurrection Bay*, 180, 183.
- 34 Graubart, *Women*, 196; 278-79.
- 35 Schneider, *Killer*, 99, 100, 99. Note: this book has come out in various editions. Pages follow the paperback version.
- 36 Schneider, *Killer*, 199.
- 37 Kaplan, *Contemporary American Judaism*, 249, see 252.
- 38 Wendy Zierler, "A Dignitary in the Land? Literary Representations of the American Rabbi" *AJS Review* 30:2 (2006), 267 [255-75]. See also Zierler's chapter in *The Sacred Calling*, 708.
- 39 See section "Human Sexuality," in Zucker, *American Rabbis ... Fiction*, 190-93.
- 40 Schneider, *Killer*, 88.
- 41 *CCAR Journal/Reform Jewish Quarterly* Spring/Summer 2021 (68:2), 1-194. Curated and edited by Marla J. Feldman.
- 42 Madelaine Adelman, "The Future is Nonbinary? It's Complicated: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Genders, Geographies, and Generations." In *CCARJ/RJQ*, Spring/Summer 2021 (68.2) 9-10 [7-27]. See note 3 above.

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- 43 Schoen and deCuir, 70-71.
- 44 Rudin, 131-132.
- 45 Schneider, *Killer*, 43; 133.
- 46 Schoen and deCuir, 185.
- 47 Erich Segal, *Acts of Faith*, (New York: Bantam, 1992), 385-86.
- 48 Galyan, *Strength*, 166.
- 49 Rudin, 255.
- 50 Herst, *Felony*, 147, 160.
- 51 Schneider, *Chanukah*, 16. Rudin, 133-134. See also “Her clothing was too stylish ... Her clothing was not stylish enough... Her skirts were too long. Her skirts were too short,” Rudin, 253.
- 52 Schoen and deCuir, 121.
- 53 Lewis, *Prayed ... Fire*, 84-5.
- 54 Wendy Spears, “The Public Image of the Woman Rabbi,” “The Public Image of the Woman Rabbi,” in *The Sacred Calling*, 688.
- 55 Shaked Karabelnicoff, “The Role of female rabbis, 47 years after the first one was ordained.” *Jerusalem Post*, June 5, 2019. <https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/the-role-of-female-rabbis-47-years-after-the-first-one-was-ordained-591710>
- 56 Schneider, *Unleavened*, 6.
- 57 Schoen and deCuir, 36.
- 58 In terms of “rabbinic positions, men make on average 18 percent more than women.” Savannah Noray. “The Gender Wage Gap in the Reform Movement: An Updated United Data Narrative.” *CCAR Journal/RJQ*, Winter 2022, (69.1), 64. Similar variations are found in the Conservative movement. “Conservative male rabbis earn more than their female counterparts, both in salary and benefits, both overall, and with controls for the type of work they perform.” Steven M. Cohen and Judith Schor. 2004. *Gender Variation in the Careers of Conservative Rabbis: A Survey of Rabbis Ordained Since 1985*, July 14, 2004, 4.  
<http://advancingwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Gender-Variation-in-the-Careers-of-Conservative-Rabbis.pdf>
- 59 Rudin, 249 (see also 254). Chaplain Abby Stone mentions “little sexual insults” she has endured but does not speak of sexual harassment per se. Shook, 39.
- 60 Hara Person, Chief Executive, CCAR. *CCAR News*. January-February 2021, Vol. 68.3, 1,3.  
<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?pli=1#inbox/FMfcgzGtwWCBnFpnBkVLGXmmqGQDhklc>  
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<sup>61</sup> Denise L. Eger, “Inside the Tent.” *The First Fifty Years: A Jubilee in Prose and Poetry Honoring Women Rabbis*. Eds. Sue Levi Elwell, Jessica Greenbaum, Hara E. Person. (New York: CCAR, 2023), 92.

<sup>62</sup> Rudin, 257. Vivian Green clearly is harassed by the president of her congregation, but he exploits their power-differential, it is not sexual harassment. Lewis, *Prayed ... Fire*, 209.

<sup>63</sup> Schneider, *Unleavened*, 38. See also the real-life comments of Rabbi Rachel Barenblat. (The Velveteen Rabbi). “Rape and Sexual Assault” <https://velveteenrabbi.blogspot.com/blog/rape-and-sexual-assault/>

<sup>64</sup> Chanel Dubofsky. *Lilith Magazine*, April 17, 2018, <https://www.lilith.org/articles/women-who-are-rabbis-experience-their-own-brand-of-harassment/>

<sup>65</sup> Selah Maya Zigelboim. *Philadelphia Jewish Exponent*, January 24, 2018, “Female Rabbis Contend Sexual Harassment Persists,” <https://www.jewishexponent.com/2018/01/24/female-rabbis-contend-sexual-harassment-persists/>

<sup>66</sup> Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus, Amy Schwartzman, Hara Person. “The Task Force on the Experience of Women in the Rabbinat.” *CCAR Journal/Reform Jewish Quarterly*, Summer 2022, (69.3), 56 [54-59]. “They didn’t have such pretty rabbis when I was a boy!” Schoen and deCuir, 66.

<sup>67</sup> Zari M. Weiss. “Women Rabbis Understanding of Success: A Study.” *CCAR Journal/Reform Jewish Quarterly*, Summer 2022, (69.3), 133 [129-39]. Note: Weiss’s article is limited to women in the Reform movement, but in likelihood it reflects the responses of women rabbis in general.

<sup>68</sup> Weiss cites data from Lorraine S. Dyke and Stephen A. Murphy, “How We Define Success: A Qualitative Study of What Matters Most to Women and Men,” *Sex Roles*, 55, no. 5 (September 2006), 139.

<sup>69</sup> Weiss, 131.

<sup>70</sup> Schneider, *Killer*, 100.

<sup>71</sup> Stern, 32.

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