

I.

It is the overarching goal of the Orthodox Union to maximize the religious involvement, and spiritual growth and fulfillment, of every woman and man in our community. Observance of Halacha and increased Torah study are fundamental to this aspiration, as we each strive to enhance our Avodas Hashem. With these fundamental imperatives in mind, on February 2, 2017, the Orthodox Union issued a statement adopting, as the policy of the organization, the Responses of our Rabbinic Panel to questions regarding the halachic propriety of (i) synagogues hiring women to fill rabbinic clergy positions; and (ii) synagogues hiring women to fill a wide range of professional non-rabbinic clergy positions.¹

Since the issuance of the Rabbinic Responses and the OU Statement, there has been widespread discussion within our community about the issues presented in those documents. Preliminarily, two fundamental facts must be emphasized: (i) the overwhelming majority of the hundreds of OU synagogues conform – and wish to continue to conform – to the guidelines established by the Rabbinic Responses; and (ii) as indicated in the OU Statement, and consistent with

¹ The OU Statement is available here: <https://www.ou.org/assets/OU-Statement.pdf>. The Responses of the Rabbinic Panel is available here: <https://www.ou.org/assets/Responses-of-Rabbinic-Panel.pdf>.

the Rabbinic Responses, the OU is committed to maximizing female involvement in the professional life of synagogues and communities, consistent with halachic norms and our mesorah. It is this latter commitment that we believe is and should be the focal point of the OU's attention, energy and resources.

II.

As reflected in our Statement, of the hundreds of OU member shuls only four currently employ women in clergy positions. With respect to these shuls, our statement noted:

We adopt as a statement of OU policy the Responses of the Rabbinic Panel transmitted herewith and anticipate that Orthodox Union member synagogues will act in accordance with these Responses. The OU, through its Synagogue Standards Commission, will enter into a dialogue with synagogues to encourage and facilitate implementation of the Responses.

Following the issuance of our Statement, OU leadership met with lay and rabbinic leadership of each of the four OU member shuls that employ women in clergy positions. We appreciate the constructive and candid discussion that

ensued, as well as the dedication and commitment of the highly skilled women we met with to the welfare and spiritual growth of their congregants – and that of the Jewish community at large.

We also recognized, and conveyed to each of these shuls, that a significant portion of the functions and services admirably performed by these women – particularly in the areas of Torah education, and family and pastoral counselling and guidance – fall, in our understanding, within the parameters of the Responses of the Rabbinic Panel. However, certain of their activities do not; and the concept of female rabbinic clergy itself falls outside the parameters of the Responses of the Rabbinic Panel.

We recognize, however, that each of the four shuls has had female clergy in their employ for a considerable period of time – and certainly well before the issuance of the Rabbinic Responses and the OU Statement. Moreover, we are taught that communal unity and *darchei shalom* are significant core Jewish values that must be weighed, advanced and nurtured; in this regard, we were guided by the views expressed by our Rabbinic Panel.

Consequently, after considerable deliberation, during which we heard the strongly held, yet competing, views of numerous members of our community,

both rabbinic and lay, and after full consultation with our Rabbinic Panel – we will not take action with respect to these congregations based on their existing arrangements in the employment of female clergy. This determination is not – and should not be viewed – as an endorsement of such arrangements. To the contrary, we will continue to urge these synagogues to modify their practices out of respect for the guidelines we have adopted. Our dialogue with these congregations will continue, and we will share with them the alternative approaches we have identified (and will, in the future, continue to identify) to maximize the participation of women within the ranks of synagogue professionals in a manner consistent with the Responses of our Rabbinic Panel. It is our fervent hope that such continued dialogue will result in adherence to the Responses of the Rabbinic Panel.² Under any circumstances, it is our intent, after a three-year period (i.e., in the first quarter of 2021), to evaluate the results of these discussions, and to issue a further determination at that time.

² The particular circumstances of each of the shuls employing female clergy are different. At least one shul believes that its female clergy has not been functioning in a Rabbinic capacity, and we are in productive and ongoing dialogue with the shul with a view toward reaching an understanding in this regard that meets the requirements of the Responses of the Rabbinic Panel. Yet another shul has indicated its desire to engage in a similar dialogue. These discussions, undertaken in manifest good faith, highlight the need for the measured approach we have outlined.

We note the following additional determinations:

First, on a going-forward basis, applications for OU membership will not be considered absent the synagogue's clear commitment to adhere to OU standards, as determined by the OU's Synagogue Standards Commission and approved by the Board of Directors.

Second, except as noted above, as a condition of continued membership, all current OU synagogue members will be expected to adhere to OU standards, as determined and administered by the OU's Synagogue Standards Commission on behalf of the Board of Directors, in accordance with the provisions of the OU Constitution. It is important to stress that OU leadership, and the OU's Synagogue Standards Commission, stand ready to consult with any OU member shul, or prospective member, that seeks guidance regarding the application of OU Standards (including the Rabbinic Panel Responses) to any proposed course of action.

Third, we want to stress that the OU does not seek – nor does it have the authority – to impose its standards on any individual congregation. Every congregation, acting through its rabbinic and lay leadership, must determine for itself the guidelines, including the halachic guidelines, under which it chooses to

function. At the same time, as a lay-based membership organization, the Orthodox Union must identify the halachic and other standards it applies to define its membership eligibility.

Fourth, there may be shuls – now, or in the future – who determine that the membership guidelines established (or that may be established) by the Orthodox Union do not match their particular halachic or hashkafic determinations, and therefore determine that membership in the OU does not align with their circumstances and hence opt to resign their membership. Surely, that is their choice. For our part, and consistent with our mission to offer our resources to as broad a spectrum of Klal Yisroel as we can, OU membership is not and will not be the sole criterion for eligibility to participate in various OU programs and services.

In sum, we are deeply and unequivocally committed to our halachic standards and the halachic process, as interpreted by Gedolei Yisroel over the millennia, and in our sacred Mesorah. We recognize that others may hold differing halachic and hashkafic viewpoints. We urge, however, that regardless of the intensity of the disagreement, at all times we must be respectful and

consistent with the twin imperatives of achdus and darchei shalom that animate our religious values.

At the same time, we urge all to appreciate that achdus and darchei shalom are reciprocal obligations. Just as the OU is cognizant of the need to consider communal unity in its decisions, those who seek to depart from well established and consistently maintained communal norms should similarly embrace such considerations. American Orthodox Jewry is a small community, and its unity is its strength. Community institutions can choose to test that unity, or we can all recognize that darchei shalom requires a deep commitment by us all, in both thought and deed.

III.

Finally, and of particular importance: we intend to continue a process of dialogue and exploration to identify and evaluate approaches to maximize the participation of women within the ranks of synagogue professionals in a manner consistent with the Responses of our Rabbinic Panel, and communal needs and sensitivities. Those Responses identified broad and significant areas of halachically acceptable involvement by women in synagogue life and leadership – including as teachers of Torah and as pastoral counsellors. It is our determined

intent to help delineate clear pathways for women's involvement in these, and other, critical areas, for those synagogues and communities that determine that such pathways are appropriate for them.

We recognize that there are significant variances in the needs and approaches of the broad range of communities encompassed by the Orthodox Union. In that context, we will continue, and expand our consultation with communities, synagogues and their rabbinic and lay leadership. It is our hope that this consultative process will include, among other topics:

- i. The needs of Orthodox women generally within our communities and synagogues;
- ii. The unique needs of particular segments of Orthodox women, including young women returning from seminary; singles; widows, divorcees and others;
- iii. Ways and means to encourage women to assume greater lay and professional roles within communal and synagogal life;
- iv. Ways to support the sincere quest of many women for growth in limmud Torah or in communal participation, including opportunities for female Torah scholars to share their Torah knowledge more broadly;

v. Developing appropriate titles for women of significant accomplishment, holding professional positions within the synagogue, educational and communal structure, thereby acknowledging their achievement and status. Consideration of the related issues of tenure, compensation (including pay equity) and benefits accorded such roles.

vi. Fostering spiritual engagement of women in synagogue services;

vii. Considering how the physical structure of shuls can be enhanced to foster greater engagement by women (e.g., mechitza; making the ezrat nashim more hospitable for weekday and Shabbat services, etc.).

We intend to report to the community on an ongoing basis regarding our efforts in each of these critical areas. It is our prayer to Hashem that these undertakings will lead to the spiritual and religious growth of each woman and man in our community, and for shalom and achdus among us all.