

Women's Rabbinic Network: We Stand With Survivors of Sexual Assault, Harrassment, And Misconduct
Reform Movement Institutions Have Enabled And Perpetrated Deep Harm. Now They Must Take Responsibility.



With the strength of thousands of years of Jewish women, we, the Women's Rabbinic Network (WRN), address the systemic lack of safety and accountability that has existed for far too long within the Reform Movement and the Jewish world at large.

Those who have experienced sexual assault, harassment, or misconduct by Jewish clergy and leaders have survived a deep betrayal of the Jewish laws and ethics those clergy and leaders are obligated to uphold. Many are still suffering from the refusal of our Jewish institutions to take responsibility for failing to keep us all safe. We see you -- both those who have come forward and those who have not yet come forward. And we honor you.

The Women's Rabbinic Network has listened for decades as our members have shared stories of abuse, harassment, and silencing at the hands of their teachers, supervisors, co-workers, donors, board members, and congregants. We know these are not isolated incidents, but rather a pattern throughout our Reform Movement institutions for which those institutions must be held to account. We have used every internal avenue available to us to push our Reform Movement to live up to its stated values, address these issues directly, and create safe, respectful Jewish communities for all. In return, we have received unfulfilled promises and repeated attempts to sideline us, our demands for accountability and justice, and most importantly, the needs of survivors.

"No one should be expected to view harassment, abuse, and assault as the price they need to pay in order to be ordained, to serve in congregations or Jewish organizations, and to be members of Jewish communities," said Rabbi Mary Zamore, Executive Director of the Women's Rabbinic Network. "We are deeply pained that the Reform Movement has failed repeatedly in its moral responsibility toward women and people of all genders who were not protected in its institutions. This is the moment for our Movement and its institutions to take responsibility, beginning by recognizing the painful truth that the institutions that have been charged with shaping, organizing, and modeling justice and ethical behavior for the clergy of our Movement have instead enabled and perpetrated deep harm."

We commend the leadership of NYC's Central Synagogue for the manner in which they handled the accounts of three women with whom Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman engaged in inappropriate sexual behavior. Rabbi Zimmerman is a former senior rabbi at Central Synagogue, past president of Hebrew Union College (HUC), and past president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR). Central Synagogue's April 27th statement should serve as a model for institutions within the Jewish community: the synagogue leadership conducted a robust investigation, named the specific abuses, addressed the needs of survivors of Rabbi Zimmerman's abuse for healing and accountability, committed to investigating any future accounts of sexual abuse, harassment, or misconduct that may come forward, and are evaluating how best to ensure that Rabbi Zimmerman's legacy is known in its complete form, including the profound harm he has caused.

We honor the courage of the women who came forward to share their stories about Rabbi Zimmerman- both recently and during the earlier ethics investigation by the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR). We also honor the strength of all those who have survived sexual harassment and abuse by rabbis, cantors, professors, and Jewish professionals.

For decades, the Women's Rabbinic Network has served as the conscience of the Reform Movement and the rabbis of rabbis, advocating on issues such as pay equity, paid family and medical leave, LGBTQ+ rights, and safe and respectful communities. We have held and protected our members as they have shared their experiences with us and stood by survivors in demanding change, even at the risk of our individual reputations, careers, and organizational standing.

Internal mechanisms have failed to bring justice and healing to so many victims and accountability to the Reform Jewish community writ large. We acknowledge and applaud the first steps that our Reform Movement partners have taken in terms of commitments to undertake investigations, to strengthen ethics requirements, and generally support survivors. But these are truly just first steps. On behalf of our members, all those who have been wounded by the institutions of the Reform Movement, and all those who believe our community must be one of safety and respect, we call upon our Movement partners, including the Union for Reform Judaism, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and the American Conference of Cantors to immediately take the following concrete steps:

1. Commit to a full, independent review of past complaints brought to your institutions to ensure justice was appropriately carried out and, where needed, rectify unresolved complaints. This includes examining past settlements and releasing survivors from silencing contracts, like non-disclosure agreements.
2. Commit to the highest level of transparency that is legally available in all forthcoming investigations by publicly naming the types of abuse that are discovered and the extent of the problems uncovered.
3. Commit to holding those found to be predators and enablers accountable by either creating or reinforcing a clear system of professional and religious accountability.
4. Commit to ensuring that both individual members and institutions as a whole will engage in a survivor-centered, trauma informed *teshuvah* (repentance) process.
5. Commit to providing therapeutic resources for those survivors who wish to use them.
6. Commit to a full safety and respect climate survey to evaluate institutional culture and put into place the policies, standards, and processes to ensure safety for all, including the on-going promotion of a feedback-rich and retaliation-free environment to support a safe and respectful culture.

For almost fifty years, the Reform Movement has been ordaining and failing its female-identified rabbis and others from marginalized groups. Now is the moment for our Movement to prove that our future will be different than our past. Now is the moment for deep reflection leading to meaningful and lasting change to ensure that people of all genders, sexual orientations, races, and abilities will be safe and respected within Reform Jewish spaces.

We believe that our Movement and our Movement institutions have the obligation and the ability to bring meaningful healing and profound change to our Movement and to the Jewish world.