

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Yom Kippur 5771**

**Contact: Jewish Women Watching**

**[www.jewishwomenwatching.com](http://www.jewishwomenwatching.com)**

**Jewish Women of Valor are Punished instead of Rewarded**

**-In the High Holiday season, Jewish Women Watching Condemns Treatment of Orthodox Women Leaders-**

Religious Jewish women devoted to Torah, worship, and communal leadership are victims of constant sexist backlash. In recent months, the Rabbinical Council of America created a blanket policy against the ordination of qualified women as rabbis; the National Council of Young Israel continues to uphold a ban on women and converts serving as synagogue presidents in their communities; Women of the Wall routinely face violence from police and bystanders for their organized worship at the Western Wall. In response, Jewish Women Watching (JWW), the anonymous, rabble-rousing feminist collective, revealed its latest project that shames the groups responsible for these events and calls on the Jewish community to support women in leadership roles. In this season of reflection and repentance, JWW calls on mainstream Orthodox leaders to do *teshuvah* [repentance], atoning for their actions that suppress valorous women.

The first audiences for this project were New York Jews gathered for Shavuot at the JCC of Manhattan and at Orthodox synagogue Kehilath Jeshurun. As Shavuot entails Torah study, the project included a biting text study of the Shabbat hymn *Eshet Chayil* (from Proverbs 31).

JWW has re-released this project for High Holidays 5771 for distribution to a targeted mailing list of key leaders in the Rabbinical Council of America, Young Israel, and officials in the Israeli police force. The introductory letter to the project stated, "In your *cheshbon nefesh* [self-examination], consider your role in the silencing acts against the women of valor in our time. Prevent these sins of oppression from being written and sealed for another year." The letter concludes "Shana tovah and please share the honey cake. There's enough to go around."

Three sexist events are highlighted in the text of the project. The first is the widely publicized Modern Orthodox rabbinical ordination of Sara Hurwitz. It seemed only moments had passed since she completed her lifetime of studies and assumed the role of communal leader with the title of "Rabba" that Agudath Israel pressured community members to strip her of the designation. The Rabbinical Council of America followed with an official statement rejecting women's ordination. "Ordination? More like

subordination!” exclaimed Emma Goldman. “Sara Hurwitz’s community and teacher supported her, while Orthodox gate-keepers refused to give her the title that is appropriate for the role she plays.”

Modern Orthodox women are barred from the rabbinate, but can they be lay leaders, moving beyond the role of sisterhood president to effect real change? In 1997, decades after the women’s movement, Gail Billig became the first female president of an Orthodox synagogue. Ten years later, the National Council of Young Israel ensured that this would not happen in their communities and declared that women and converts are not permitted to be presidents of synagogues, a position they still uphold.

In Israel, women who want to express their religious devotion are met with physical threats, arrest, and harassment. Since January, attacks on Women of the Wall (WoW), a monthly prayer group that has assembled for over twenty years at the Western Wall to pray, sing, and read Torah, have increased in frequency and severity. On January 5, 2010, the police fingerprinted Anat Hoffman, a leader of the group, and threatened her with a felony charge. On May 11<sup>th</sup>, Noa Raz, another member of WoW, was physically attacked in Beersheva because her arms bore the marks from her *tefillin*. On Rosh Chodesh Av, Anat Hoffman was again detained, fined and banned from the Western Wall for carrying a Torah scroll. On a regular basis, WoW members have to dodge flying chairs and other debris and are repeatedly cursed at and harassed.

As JWW member Rosalia Luxemburg commented, “The beautiful words of *Eshet Chayil* have inspired Jewish women to leadership throughout the centuries, but the Orthodox establishment is demonstrating that those are only empty words. We need to reward our valorous women, not punish them.” As it says in the song itself, “Give her credit for the fruit of her labors.”

JWW’s text study can be found on [www.jewishwomenwatching.org](http://www.jewishwomenwatching.org).