

Rabbi Helaine Ettinger

Rosh Hodesh Nisan and Equal Pay Day

Many Jewish women who came of age in the 70's and 80's will remember the excitement and creativity with which we introduced *Rosh Hodesh* groups in our communities. Our *Rosh Hodesh* groups varied in size, in structure, in content, and in leadership, but all focused on bringing Jewish women together at the start of a new Jewish month, a *Rosh Hodesh*.

The midrash often cited as the basis for women's gatherings on the new moon is from *Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer*:ⁱ

As a reward for (the women's refusal to participate in the making of the Golden Calf), God gave the new moons as holidays to women, and in the future world too they will be rewarded for their firm faith in God, in that, like the new moons, they too, may monthly be rejuvenated.

Liberal Jewish women and traditional Jewish women, straight women and LGBTQ women, younger women and older women embraced this women's holiday with enthusiasm. Here was an opportunity to reclaim and reimagine an ancient custom, celebrating the new moon. We felt we were opening a new chapter in Jewish women's spirituality. And we were. As the twentieth century drew to a close, women's roles and participation in Jewish life expanded in countless ways. Today Rosh Hodesh groups are nothing new. Women rabbis and cantors and educators and executive directors regularly serve in our communities. Jewish women lead worship, read from the Torah, count in a minyan (in many places), and serve as lay leaders in countless synagogues and Jewish organizations. It would seem that Jewish women have achieved full status in the Jewish community when we consider all of these breakthroughs. It would seem so. But it is not so.

As we approach Rosh Hodesh Nisan, 5779, and look forward to Pesach, we find that women still suffer discrimination in hiring and in compensation, specifically within the Reform Movement, and generally within American Society. Which is why I am struck by the confluence of Equal Pay Day and Rosh Hodesh Nisan falling in the same week this year. Equal Pay Day falls on Tuesday, April 2 this year. "This date symbolizes how far into the year women must work to earn what men earned in the previous year".ⁱⁱ In other words, a woman must work 15 months to earn what a man earns in 12 months. Although there has been a gradual narrowing of the wage gap between men and women, and "The wage gap has narrowed by about 15 percentage points during the last 23 years, ranging from 62 percent in 1982 to 77 percent in 2010. Since 1973, however, approximately 60 percent of the change in the wage gap is due to the fall in men's real earnings and only about 40 percent to the increase in women's wages. At this rate of change, the Institute for Women's Policy Research estimates that it will take 50 years to close the wage gap."ⁱⁱⁱ We will be well into the second half of the 21st century before we close the wage gap.

Rosh Hodesh Nisan begins on Shabbat, Friday night April 5. The month of Nisan ushers in *Z'man Cherutaynu*, the time of our Freedom. What kind of freedom are we celebrating in a society in which women are not paid equally with men for the same work and they are not promoted at the same rates as men in the same fields? Women are not as free as men if they are not receiving comparable pay for

comparable work. Their freedom is restricted by the smaller wages they earn. Furthermore, when women earn less, it affects their access to health care, child care, education, housing, pension, and retirement, to name just a few areas of inequity.

Within our Reform Movement, the most recent studies show that “within the same positions, women are paid significantly less than men.

On average, administrators who are women face a 19 percent penalty compared to men.

Depending on job title and congregation size, women rabbis are paid 4 percent to 13 percent less than men within each group;

The average pay penalty among full-time cantors is 14 percent, but in the largest congregations the pay gap grows to 19 percent”.^{iv}

At our Passover Seder we lift of the matzah and call out “All who are hungry, come and eat”. It is time to look inward and recognize those who are hungry are the women right here in our midst. As women we are hungry for equal pay and for equal opportunities. Together, men and women can lift women out of their inferior positions in the work force by committing to correct the imbalances in our workplaces and in our movement. We must examine our hiring practices and our promotions. We must be intentional in our recruitment and mentoring. We must ask ourselves whether our Jewish values are accurately reflected in the way we allocate our money and the way we treat our employees. A whole new generation of Jewish women have come of age since those early experimentations with *Rosh Hodesh* groups. Let us change the culture in time for these women to benefit from our effort, lest their children come of age in a society that still does not value its women equally with its men.

ⁱ Midrash, *Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer* 45 (circa 750) as told in Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews*, Vol.3:122.

ⁱⁱ National Committee on Pay Equity, Equal Pay Day website, <https://www.pay-equity.org/day.html>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., <https://www.pay-equity.org/info-Q&A.html>.

^{iv} Elise Gould, “The Gender Gap in the Reform Movement”, *CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly*, Fall 2018, pp.49-50.