FRANCINE ROSTON WAS IN HER 20s, working as a congregational summer intern at a large Conservative synagogue in the Midwest, when she got her first taste of the kind of challenges she’d have to face as a woman in the rabbinate. One day, when she and the congregation’s rabbi were alone in his office, the rabbi—who was married—asked if she would give him a massage. Roston recalled. She froze. “In my head, I was going, ‘No! No! No!’ But I didn’t know what to do.” After a long pause, Roston recounted, the rabbi said, “Oh, you can say no.” Roston said no.

A few years later, after being ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary and landing her first job as an assistant rabbi at a Conservative synagogue in suburban New Jersey, Roston said she found herself the subject of verbal harassment from the deputy cantor, a man who routinely called her a “bitch” and a “cunt” and threatened to have her fired, she said. According to Roston, when she reported the harassment to the senior rabbi, he was sympathetic but never took action. After one particularly intense tirade, Roston said, she contacted the Rabbinical Assembly, which oversees synagogue hiring and placement for Conservative rabbis. The RA referred her to a lawyer who helped her write a letter of resignation, saying she wanted out of her contract early. She was soon fired.

“I remember the utter sense of helplessness and powerlessness,” said Roston, now 51 and a community rabbi in Whitefish, Mont. “I thought my life was over. I thought my career was over. I had to sell my home and I went to therapy.”

He recalled one blowup in which he acknowledged he might have called Roston names, but he said he wouldn’t have used the word “cunt” and, he claimed, he wouldn’t routinely verbally abuse her. “Did I call her a bitch? I can’t 100 percent deny it,” he added. “But I don’t remember those words.”

The senior rabbi from the synagogue declined to comment for this story. The RA declined to respond to inquiries seeking comment on Roston’s case.

As awareness of this problematic behavior grows—including among rabbis themselves—some Jewish institutions are taking steps to ameliorate matters by training clergy and educating synagogues and other Jewish institutions to recognize and mitigate their own biased behavior. The first step is to hear the stories of women who have been victimized so the Jewish community can take a hard look at the institutions and behaviors that perpetuate these inequalities, Zamore said. Then the difficult work must begin to create policies, procedures and training to effect change.

Rabbi Harold Berman, chairman of the RA’s ethics committee, the Vaad Hakavod, said that based on Roston’s account, it seems the cantor hadar hadassahmagazine.org
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suffered at the hands of fellow clergy
stories—about abuse or harassment
is rarely simple, especially for clergy
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should have been disciplined by his
synagogue or organization. “I believe
that it is the role of the RA, but not
the Vaad Hakavod, to be able to
serve as a resource and an advocate
for rabbis who are treated unfairly
through any congregational issues,”
Berman said through a spokesman,
noting that he was speaking only for
himself. “But the responsibility of
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Addressing workplace harassment
is rarely simple, especially for clergy
at the beginning of their careers.
Rabbis who share their #MeToo
stories—about abuse or harassment
suffered at the hands of fellow clergy
or congregants—may be in a partic-
ularly vulnerable position, because
they’re often subordinate not just to
senior rabbis, but also to congregants
who control their contracts.

“For a rabbi to bring a complaint
against a congregant, you’re automat-
ically putting your job at risk because
congregation leaders are their bosses,”
said Rabbi Rebecca Sirbu, director
of the division of member and unit
services at Hadassah, the Women’s
Zionist Organization of America, and
until recently director of Rabbis
Without Borders at Clal, a Jewish religious
leadership organization. “I think cases
of harassment are grossly underre-
ported because people don’t want to
put their jobs at risk. There are very
few safe places for [female] rabbis.”
It’s impossible to tell whether
things are improving or not for
women in the rabbinate in the wake
of #MeToo because so few have
spoken up about such matters in the
past. It’s also difficult to say whether
rabbis have it worse or better than
other female Jewish professionals.
What’s certain, activists say, is that
a growing number of women are
coming forward now to share their
stories—some privately, others in
semi-private forums like the closed
Facebook groups #GamAni (Hebrew
for #MeToo; the hashtag is used
both by Jewish groups and women
in Israel) and Jewish Women’s Clergy
Group, and a few publicly.

Since the emergence of #MeToo,
“there’s been a heightened conscious-
ness of women that what they’ve
experienced really falls into the cate-
gory of unacceptable behavior,” Sirbu
said. “People are brushing it off less.
I’m not sure that men are improving
their behavior.”

Rabbi Marcia Wasserman, director
of the Center for Jewish Ethics of
the Reconstructionist Rabbinical
College, said that until the #MeToo
movement, the focus was on prevent-
ing abusive behavior by rabbis. The
fact that rabbis can be victims, too,
has been a revelation. “We were
astonished by testimony from women
rabbis in the field having been victim-
ized.” Wasserman said.

One Conservative rabbi in New
Jersey in her mid-40s who asked to
remain anonymous recalled harass-
ment that started on her first day of
work at a synagogue when she was
newly ordained over a decade ago.
“A congregant came in and the first
thing he said was that I had a better
ass than my predecessors,” she
recounted.

The rabbi also described being set
upon at kiddush not long afterward
by a man who put his arm around
her shoulder and touched her right
breast. “Wow, I didn’t know rabbis
could be so sexy,” she recalled the
man saying.

Comments about appearances are
par for the course, rabbis said, along
with touching that crosses the line.
“Oh, you’re so pretty, I don’t know
who to kiss first, you or the Torah,”
Sirbu, who is in her 40s, said she
has been told by congregants while
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Orthodox seminary in New York that ordains female clergy. Sometimes, the bias is explicit. One young female rabbi in California who asked not to be identified recalled being told by a Conservative congregation’s longtime senior rabbi that the shul would never hire a woman of childbearing age because the difficulty of juggling competing priorities would make it unfair either to the congregation or to her family. She also claimed that she was terminated in 2015 from her congregational position for going on maternity leave. While some such incidents result in lawsuits—and, in her case, a settlement—rabbi’s more often lack the financial resources for extended legal battles or fear that suing a former employer will doom their chances of being hired elsewhere. Those were among the reasons cited by many of the women interviewed for this story who insisted on anonymity.

A s the national conversation about #MeToo issues has intensified, a group of foundation funders launched the Safety Respect Equity coalition, which aims to create standards for Jewish groups and is funding an array of projects to provide training and education about gender-based discrimination.

Sirbu, one of the coalition’s leaders, is coordinating a project that helps synagogues recognize unconscious bias in hiring. She also conducts trainings around the country to help Jewish institutions identify and address these shortcomings.

For example, Sirbu said, job descriptions often use language that signals a preference for a rabbi of a certain gender, using words like “strong” and “charismatic” to signal male and “nurturing, warm and friendly” to signal female. Such language both evinces a subconscious bias by the search committees and discourages candidates of the “unwanted” gender from applying, she said. As a fix, Sirbu suggests a gender-blind rating system for rabbi candidates.

The Women’s Rabbinic Network is spearheading two initiatives related to these issues. One, which started three years ago and brings together the 17 organizations that fall under the official auspices of the Reform movement, is examining inequity and bias to salary discrepancies.

The Women’s Rabbinic Network is designed to prompt deeper thinking, such as “Tell me, what do you think a rabbi looks like?” rather than respond harshly, the rabbis are encouraged to use it as a teachable moment and practice constructive responses designed to prompt deeper thinking, such as “Tell me, what do you think a rabbi looks like?” said Zamore of the Women’s Rabbinic Network.

“I’m gratified that we are finally, in the last two years, talking about these issues. But there is a great deal of work to be done!”

—RABBI MARY ZAMORE

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