

Gender equality in Judaism

Orthodox and Reform Jews have different attitudes towards the roles of women and men in worship and authority.

Orthodox and Reform Jews

Within Judaism there are different denominations often referred to as 'movements'. Two of these movements are:

Orthodox Jews

Reform Jews

These groups of Jews have slightly different interpretations of the sacred texts of Judaism. This leads to slightly different teachings and practices, especially when looking at gender equality.

Orthodox Jews

Orthodox Jews hold very traditional values of Judaism. They believe that the Torah was written by God. They therefore stick rigidly to the beliefs, teachings and practices, and do not believe that they should be changed to meet the changes of society.

In Orthodox Judaism, the role of women is generally seen as separate but of equal value. Women's obligations and responsibilities are different from men's, but no less important. The primary role of a woman is as wife and mother.

Reform Jews

Reform Jews believe that the Torah was inspired by God but written by humans. As a result, they have a more relaxed and open view of the beliefs, teachings and practices of Judaism. They are willing to make changes in order to keep up with the changes we are seeing in society.

Reform Jews believe in the equality of men and women. Both husband and wife may work outside the home, take part in domestic work and raise the children.

Men and women in worship

There are some differences within the practice of worship between Orthodox and Reform Judaism.

In the Orthodox tradition, worship is led by men. They believe that the woman's role is to look after the home and family, which is considered just as important as the role of men.

Although Reform Jews take a more equal stance on the role of men and women in worship, there are still certain things that women cannot be included in, eg: leading certain parts of the service, serving as a judge, being counted in the minyan.

Another difference between the Orthodox and Reform worship is the seating arrangements for men and women. In Orthodox traditions women will sit in a different part of the synagogue to men. This is to avoid distraction, and to help them concentrate on the service.

In Reform traditions, men and women sit together in the synagogue.

Discrimination

Although men and women have different roles within Judaism, it is important to note that they do not see this as discrimination. Discrimination is frowned upon in Judaism, as the Torah states that men and women were created equally in the image of God.

It is also important to note that some Orthodox Jews take part in campaigns for women to be able to take part in worship the same way men can.

Men and women in authority

The role of men and women in authority can vary between the Orthodox and Reform Jewish movements. The main difference between the two is:

Orthodox movements - only men can be ordained as rabbis and lead worship

Reform movements - both men and women can take the role of rabbi

Despite women being ordained as rabbis in Reform Judaism, there will still be things they cannot do, eg being counted in the minyan.

There are other more general differences between men and women in Judaism, such as some of the mitzvot (rules) not applying to women.

For example, women do not have to wear the tallith (prayer shawl) or tefillin (small leather boxes). Also it is a woman's role to do some of the religious duties, such as beginning Shabbat.