Liberals Are That Way Too?

By Rabbi Deborah K. Bravo

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Rick, Danny, Jonah, Mark and Brad. One might think this is a list of possible names for you new baby boy. No, this is the list of the top ranking individuals in the newly re-organized Reform Jewish movement. And no, this is not a page from our history – this is 2012.

The proud announcement arrived in the inboxes of congregational leaders yesterday afternoon, boasting of the accomplishments in the first month of our new regime. This email comes not one week after the Forward published an editorial entitled Where Are the Women, reflecting on a recent article in the New York Times discussing gender issues in Israel and paralleling our own lack of women in public Jewish life in America.

So it begs to ask the question – where are the women? The answer one might receive from the Union for Reform Judaism’s pr is: did you not see the names of Barbara and Donna? How could I possibly miss them. They are the CFO and COO, the women who will never be seen, heard from or quoted. Because who ever hears from the CFO and COO? We hear from the president, vice-presidents, senior advisor to the president, and the new director of youth engagement.

We can certainly add to the list of names: Jean, Paula, Jane and Juliana. They are some of the many women behind the men who will do much of the work, but are rarely seen.

I would expect to see this list as the top-ranking officials in the Orthodox world, in the Catholic Church, and maybe even in the political arena, but how can it be that in 2012, the movement that, according to its own definition on its website, prides itself on being inclusive and is committed to the absolute equality of women in all areas, does not have a single woman in its top tier of leadership?

In an article written my our immediate past president Rabbi Eric Yoffie on the notion of why be Reform, he articulates five basic tenets of Reform Judaism, four of which have relevance to this topic.

1. *Reform Jews are committed to a Judaism that changes and adapts to the needs of the day.* There is no question that Jews today need women in leadership. Shifra Bronznick, founding president of Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community, has demonstrated repeatedly the lack of women in Jewish leadership positions. And the liberal Jewish movement needs to be on board, if not leading the charge.

*2.* *Reform Jews are committed to the absolute equality of women in all areas of Jewish life*. I’m not sure much more need to be said. Putting only men as the face of a movement, and women behind the scenes, is not equality as we understand it in 2012. And this all male line up is especially troubling given the fact that our partner Reform organizations are also led by men. We may have been the first movement to ordain women rabbis, invest women cantors and elect women as presidents of our congregations. However, as we celebrate the 40th year of the ordination of the first woman rabbi, Sally Priesand, an occasion virtually ignored at the movement’s recent bi-annual convention, we should not still wonder where are the women.

3. *Reform Jews are committed to social justice.* Even non-Jews understand that a top value in social justice is equality. We are fighting for women world-wide who don’t have rights based on gender. We are fighting with the Orthodox Jewish world to maintain a voice in the Jewish world. So how can we not be an example from within and have women at the top of our leadership ladder?

4. *Reform Jews are committed to the principle of inclusion, not exclusion*. To be an inclusive people, we are taught to allow all people into our world. We pride ourselves on the inclusion of all people. The bi-lines on many of our congregational newsletters read: a congregation that welcome people of all race, genders, ethnic backgrounds, physical capabilities, sexual orientations, national origins and marital status. Perhaps this is an instance where we can be the teachers to our teachers and leaders.

I would never wish for a world where women are handed positions because they did not deserve them or earn them. However, I cannot imagine, with the thousands of women rabbis, educators and lay leaders in our movement, that we cannot find a few who are worthy to sit at the table of honor.