

Modern Orthodox Judaism says 'no' to women rabbis

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(RNS) Women who would be Orthodox rabbis had a major setback Friday (October 30) when the highest religious body for Modern Orthodox Jews ruled against their ordination.

The Rabbinical Council of America officially prohibited the ordination of women, or the use of the term *rabbi* or *maharat* for women, in what it described as a direct vote of its membership.

The prohibition comes six years after the founding of a yeshiva, or religious school, for women in New York City. The school, Yeshivat Maharat, has ordained less than a dozen women who use the honorific *maharat* instead of *rabbi* and has placed graduates and interns at 17 Orthodox synagogues in the U.S. and Canada.

The resolution states, “RCA members with positions in Orthodox institutions may not ordain women into the Orthodox rabbinate, regardless of the title used; or hire or ratify the hiring of a woman into a rabbinic position at an Orthodox institution; or allow a title implying rabbinic ordination to be used by a teacher” in an Orthodox institution.

The RCA is made up of more than 1,000 Orthodox rabbis in 14 countries in North and South America and Israel. Its members are mostly Modern Orthodox Jews who integrate traditional Jewish practices and beliefs while engaging with the secular world. About 10 percent of American Jews consider themselves Orthodox.

In a statement, Shalom Baum, RCA’s president, described the group’s opposition to the ordination of women as “overwhelming.” In a letter to RCA members, he added, “As we move forward, we must ensure that women’s voices are heard and respected.”

Though this is the third time the RCA has addressed women's ordination, this is the most forceful. In 2010, just after the establishment of Yeshivat Maharat, it issued a statement affirming a role for women in Orthodoxy, but confining that role to already established traditions. In 2013, just after the ordination of Yeshivat Maharat's first class of women, the RCA reiterated that position and issued a statement regretting "the leadership of the school has chosen a path that contradicts the norms of our community."

Sara Hurwitz, Yeshivat Maharat's dean and first ordained woman, said she received "overwhelming support," after the resolution was announced. "We are deeply gratified."

She also said the school would continue ordaining women.

"We continue to change facts on the ground," she said. "Recruit more students, train more students, place more students all over the country."