

In 2009, Yeshivat Maharat broke through a glass ceiling, becoming the first Orthodox seminary in North America to ordain women as clergy. Today, Yeshivat Maharat counts 49 *ba'alot semikha*, graduates of its core semikha program and its advanced Kollel executive ordination track. In 2019, the Jim Joseph Foundation awarded Maharat a grant to support its executive ordination track and empower graduates to garner the respect and authority that rabbinic ordination and title conveys; increase earnings so that they are on par with that of their male counterparts; and be elevated into top leadership positions.

In spring 2021, Yeshivat Maharat engaged Rosov Consulting to explore the extent to which these outcomes have been realized and compare them to those produced by the yeshiva's core semikha program. This report showcases findings from 19 interviews that were conducted in July 2021.

Key Findings

The Power of Semikha

The reach of Yeshivat Maharat through its alumnae is remarkably wide, both in terms of their fields of work and geography. Alumnae are employed in high-level positions in academia, legal and medical work, youth and adult education, nonprofits, and synagogues. Four alumnae started their own nonprofits, including one startup congregation. Yeshivat Maharat alumnae are generally very satisfied with these roles, with 15 out of the 19 we spoke to reporting "high" job satisfaction and the remaining 4 reporting "medium" satisfaction. While alumnae serve in a wide variety of positions, the core elements of these positions encompass roles that have historically shaped rabbinic work: sharing wisdom through teaching, writing, and speaking; organizational leadership; and building and nurturing community.

Teaching: Many alumnae find teaching students to be their primary passion, providing personal and professional satisfaction that stems from sharing Jewish wisdom. While many were teachers prior to their time at Yeshivat Maharat, they feel that earning semikha has granted them access to new teaching opportunities and greater respect and recognition for their work.

"Having semikha is more powerful in these spaces: teaching as an Orthodox rabbi in pluralistic spaces. It makes it clear that the Orthodox community is interested in being in conversation with non-Orthodox Jews, it's a much more powerful statement." (Executive Track)

Writing and Speaking: Beyond the classroom, many Yeshivat Maharat alumnae find a new public voice through speaking and publishing. Many have been invited to speak to media and at congregations, conferences, and churches, increasing their self-

confidence to write and publish sermons, op-eds, and Jewish responsa in local and national publications.

"I was asked to be a keynote speaker on a panel, I think they asked me because of my leadership in the movement and also because I had semikha. I was pretty nervous, but the team of women I learned with, helped me prepare, and I was really proud I was able to do it." (Executive Track)

Organizational Leadership: Many alumnae, particularly those working in Jewish organizations, hold leadership roles in which they directly influence and enact significant changes at the organizational or community level. Some have embarked on entrepreneurial ventures such as environmental organizations, startup shuls, and community development initiatives. Alumnae also serve as chairs and advisory members for mikvah councils, ethics committees, and other high-profile leadership opportunities that reflect both the skill and character of each alumna, as well as the reputation of Yeshivat Maharat.

Building Community: We heard from many alumnae about the personal connections they develop and their ability to comfort, console, and guide people, individually and as a community, through challenging times. Alumnae shared with us how, particularly throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, they provided pastoral counseling to families, their students, and their congregations. Yeshivat Maharat alumnae often find themselves, sometimes unexpectedly, becoming feminist role models in their communities or organizations.

"I get to be part of framing the narrative, I get to decide what the Jewish community is talking about, what we say about it and how we say it." (Core Track)

Yeshivat Maharat's Contributions, Supports, and Limitations

Alumnae credited the knowledge and skills they received from their training as integral to their successes. They also spoke about dispositions of self-awareness and purpose developed during their time at Maharat as essential, as well as their collegueship with fellow classmates and alumnae. The majority of alumnae benefit from the reputation of Maharat and the long-term relationships fostered by its leadership with employers across different fields. Most alumnae expressed gratitude for the many ways in which the yeshiva provided initial and ongoing support throughout their career search and advancement, including from alumnae and teacher networks.

"I think that [being a student at Yeshivat Maharat] put me on certain organizations' radars, they told me we're keeping track of you." (Core Track)

"Having the title Rabbi has helped me gain entry into conversations I might not have had a part in." (Executive Track)

Where Yeshivat Maharat Could Do More:

Alumnae offered some suggestions for potential areas of growth when it comes to supporting students and graduates in their early career phases. First, Maharat can offer more career guidance and preparation for non-pulpit jobs. Second, and more commonly heard, are opportunities and tools to manage the "post-Yeshivat Maharat blues" and loneliness that can accompany their positions. Core Track alumnae were more likely than Executive Track alumni to expect ongoing support from the yeshiva in establishing their careers and supporting ongoing career advancement.

"There is definitely a sisterhood, common language and experience is a huge value add. You know these are a group of people you can get help [from]." (Executive Track)

The Challenges and Barriers Alumnae Face

Unequal Treatment and Misperceptions of Rabbas:

The biggest challenge faced by Yeshivat Maharat alumnae is being a female rabbinic figure in the Orthodox world. In the few Orthodox synagogues that have created roles for female rabbis, there seems to be an implicit understanding that these are junior roles with no path for advancement. With the exception of the few alumnae leading their own congregations, pulpit roles for women are often limited to the typically "female" roles of community and family engagement.

"It's hard to be an Orthodox woman rabbi in a city that is just outside the pale of the Orthodox community. The Orthodox shuls here are just not on board, and I don't want to be a pulpit rabbi at all, feels hard to be in the community." (Core Track)

Loneliness: Some Core Track alumnae shared that they felt a sense of loneliness following graduation as they sought to navigate the paths of being the only Orthodox female rabbis in their communities.

The Confidence Gap: Despite hearing from many alumnae that the yeshiva experience instilled in them greater confidence in their abilities to teach and speak publicly, about half of the alumnae we spoke with expressed ongoing struggles with self-confidence after leaving Yeshivat Maharat.

"Semikha is just the starting point. It's the credential that tells people you know what you need to learn, not that you know everything." (Executive Track).

Conclusion

The alumnae in this study, representing a broad range of titles and roles within the Jewish community, share a strong sense of pride in their accomplishments and satisfaction from their work. They are driven by a love of tradition and Torah and have established careers that give them a sense of meaning and purpose. They are role models within their work and communities, and they are all trailblazers in their respective fields. Remarkably, despite barriers to their advancement, they report strong levels of job satisfaction. They credit their time at Yeshivat Maharat and their ongoing relationship with the institution and its alumnae network with providing a platform from which to build a career, increasing their skills, and cultivating their self-awareness and self-confidence.

Nevertheless, Orthodox female rabbis unfortunately often experience challenges as they chart their career journeys. Given the consistent difficulties many alumni face in their careers including their unequal treatment and barriers to advancement, loneliness, and a persistent confidence gap, there is room for Yeshivat Maharat to buoy its graduates through the stormy waters many will inevitably face.