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Australian Orthodox women's alliance launches speakers bureau

By **Paula Towers** February 22, 2022

PAULA TOWERS: The Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, which aims to help women take roles of religious leadership, expects to have 80-100 women on the books

A SPEAKERS BUREAU promoting Orthodox Jewish women launched this month looks set to end up with 80-100 women on its books, Nomi Kaltmann, the inaugural president of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance Australia (JOFA) told *Plus61J Media*.

"There's so few opportunities for Orthodox women, but [the bureau] is not limited to Orthodox women," Kaltmann explained. "If they believe that what they have to say would be of value to an Orthodox community, we are happy to have them sign up as well."

The topics of expertise of those who have signed up cover a broad range of areas, including Jewish philosophy, financial literacy, Jewish representation in film and television; consumer design, blockchain and digital security, managing the risks of climate change as a community, and understanding law for non-lawyers.

"There's an amazing array of women from a variety of states, backgrounds, ages, and experiences and I think that's reflected in what they do," Kaltmann enthused.

Though the speakers come from four Australian states and territories, and mostly from NSW and Victoria, JOFA is hoping more women from the smaller communities will feel encouraged to join.

Kaltmann said one of the reasons for setting up the bureau was that community organisations had been trying to get women speakers and may have approached one or two but if they weren't free, they may not have had a back-up.

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Cultural conditioning is also a factor. "Women can be highly qualified in their professional lives but because they're not used to taking on roles of leadership in their religious lives, they lack the confidence to put themselves forward – making it increasingly difficult for synagogues to do the right thing," she added.

The bureau already includes speakers who are highly qualified doctors, lawyers, teachers, accountants, nurses, mothers, professors and rabbanit [three women who have been ordained as Orthodox rabbis in Israel and New York, who now live in Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney.]

"If you're searching for the right person for your panel, for example how modesty laws interplay with medicine, you can now find them; or if you're a doctor you can answer women's sexual health and health questions, which is really helpful for Orthodox women who may not feel comfortable with someone outside of their community."

JOFA Australia is the second international branch of the original alliance which was founded in New York 1997, followed by a branch in the UK in 2013. The Australian branch held its inaugural event in May 2021 and has been very busy since then.

JOFA set up tax deductibility status in Australia, recruited donors and established the first Orthodox scholarship fund here – awarding scholarships to 20 women who wanted to become qualified Kallah teachers – experts in Jewish law.

It also hosted three online events. Two were by "trailblazing" Israeli rabbanit, said Kaltmann, and the third featured a fertility expert, who spoke about understanding the Jewish law ramifications around egg-freezing and IVF.

Upcoming events include an Israeli higher learning institution discussing remote programs also featuring two Australian women doing a five-year *halachic* training program. "Women are studying Torah like never before… women are at some of the highest degrees of Jewish literacy. If you have these highly educated women, why wouldn't you be utilising the talent within your community?"

Kaltmann said JOFA Australia also aims to continue awarding scholarships on an annual basis. ""This year [is] going to be in the writing domain; we're going to partner with Jewish newspapers to increase the representation of Orthodox women in their pages."

To encourage growth of the Speaker Bureau, the expression of interest form is being kept open to allow more women to nominate themselves or other qualified women.

CLICK HERE FOR THE SPEAKER BUREAU

Photo: screen shot from the JOFA Speaker Bureau gallery