

National Victoria [Opinion](#)

Orthodox Jewish women are raising their voices together

By **Nomi Kaltmann**

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I attended Jewish day school from the age of three.

At Jewish schools, the day is longer than at other schools, often starting at 8am and finishing after 4pm. Teachers squeeze in a double curriculum of maths, science and English in addition to Torah, Talmud and Hebrew language lessons.

To have command of Jewish texts you must be literate in Hebrew and Aramaic. These ancient languages can be difficult and the grammar is fiddly. The alphabet also reads from right to left.

When I was 11, I visited Israel for the first time. I met my Israeli cousins and the languages I was learning at school took on a new dimension.

I understood that if I wanted to be able to speak to my cousins, or to be literate in my tradition's foundational texts, I needed to learn these languages.

Everything Jewish was deeply interesting to me: Torah, Talmud and Jewish philosophy. I devour it all. At university, I completed double degrees in arts and law. I worked in the Parliament of Victoria and for the Parliament of Australia.

My life was rich and full and yet, despite being highly literate in Jewish texts and Jewish languages, I was never asked to present my Jewish knowledge in any religious setting. None of my friends were asked either.

In Orthodox Judaism, leadership roles in religious life are mainly held by men. Women, no matter how literate they are, are used to taking a back seat.

While sometimes Orthodox Jewish law does not allow women to take on certain religious roles (such as being a witness in a Jewish court), there are plenty of opportunities that are allowed, but cultural conditioning can prevent women being put forward for them.

All-male panels are unfortunately common. Women not being considered for the same Torah teaching opportunities in religious life occurs with unfortunate frequency.

About two years ago, I decided enough was enough. Along with a committed board, I founded the first Australian branch of the [Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance](#). We push for change to better include women in all areas of religious life within the Orthodox tradition.

We push back against cultural conditioning that prevents women from getting ahead, and we actively encourage women to take on leadership roles in all areas of Jewish life.

This month we have launched the first ever Jewish women's public speaker bureau. More than 65 women from four Australian states and territories have signed up.

Today's Jewish women are the most literate generation in our history. My friends and I can read the Torah and Talmud in their original languages. We can teach these foundational texts. We can provide commentaries of our own. We just need the opportunities to do so.

The bureau will help synagogues and organisations find an extraordinarily talented list of women to speak in public. Women who are doctors, lawyers, professors and advocates. Women who are experts in the ancient texts and can teach them with devotion and dedication.

Australian Jewish women want to be counted.