

# Apart but not alone

## Maine's three female rabbis savor their close ties

Story and Photography  
By JENNIFER ACKER

Every week three of Maine's rabbis meet for a study session at northern New England's largest synagogue, in Portland. Rabbi Susan Bulba Carvutto jokes about taking the meeting on the road — "The Three Traveling Rabbis" she calls it — in musketeer fashion. They would attract an audience, even if just for curiosity. For all three are women, they represent different movements of the Jewish religion, and they are tireless practitioners of their faith.

Maine has a dozen rabbis, scattered over a wide area. The 12 are close and mutually supportive, as you might expect for leaders of a religion that is a distinct minority in Maine. But there is a special bond among Rabbis Carvutto of Augusta, Ruth Smith of Bath and Carolyn Braun of Portland based on several

not act as an intermediary between humans and God; she has no special religious status. Other than marriages, most religious functions do not require the presence of a rabbi.

The theme of education resonates in these rabbis' job descriptions and in their discussions. Braun entered her profession because she thought the only educated Jews were rabbis: "I've wanted to be a rabbi since I was 10 years old...I just loved the study of it." Smith, who appears serious but soon shows an easy smile, is the education director for her Bath congregation of 75 families, teaching public adult education classes, Hebrew School for elementary school children, weekly bar-mitzvah classes and Sunday school. Although all three women are quick to admit that there is no such thing, during a typical week Carvutto does much of the same, including tutoring and

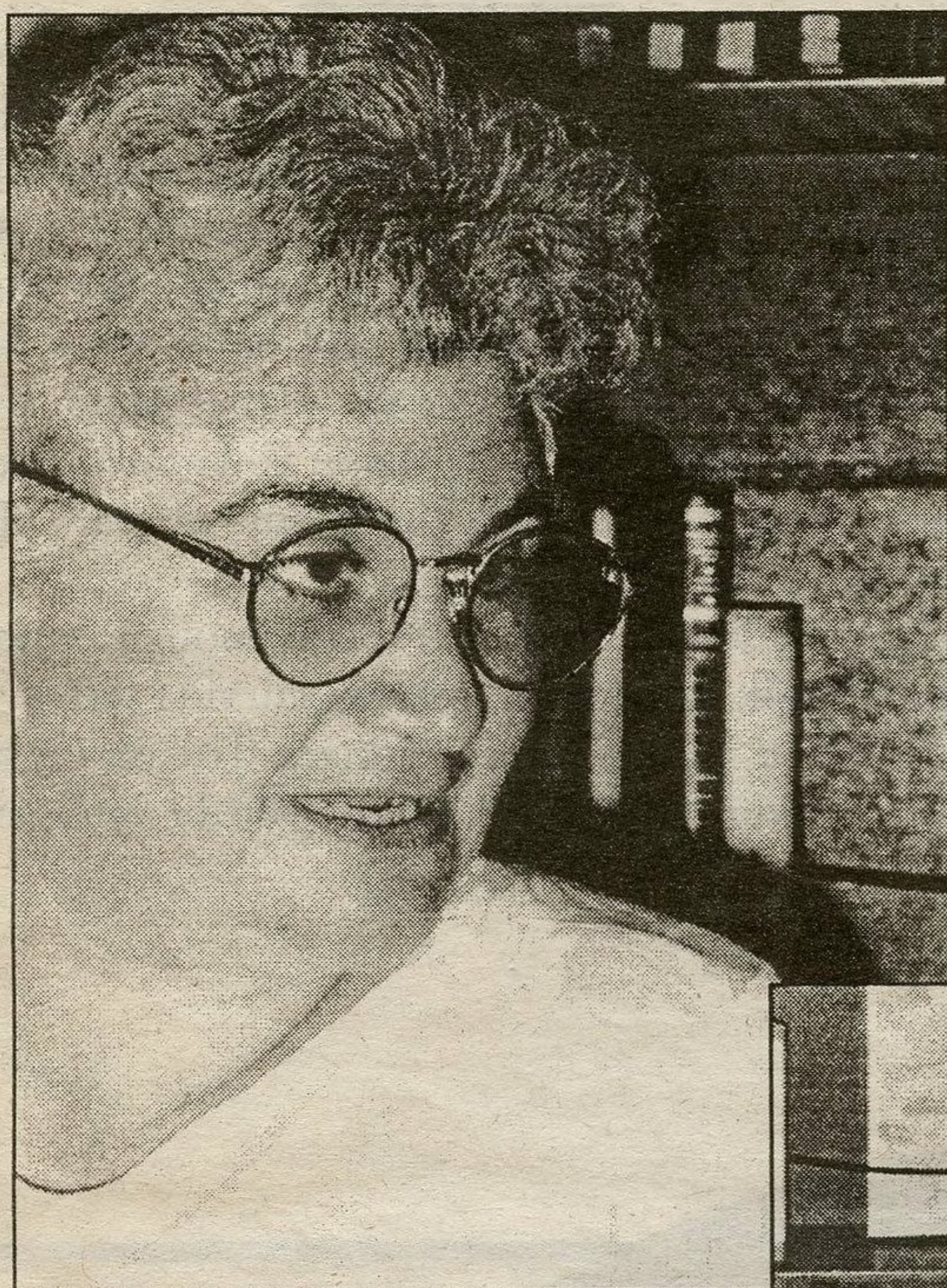
tion involvement in weekly Shabbat services. Smith strives to teach her congregation enough that they may lead services themselves: "Judaism is a participatory religion...the Mishna refers to 'the one who goes before the ark' rather than 'the rabbi.'"

Educational and community interests create a strong bond between these three rabbis, but on the surface the women differ in important ways. Wearing her long, brown hair simply and straight, Rabbi Smith is a Reconstructionist rabbi, ordained by a movement that has grown rapidly in the second half of this century, a movement that "wanted to help Jews in the modern world think about what that meant." She is 35, married and has no children. Rabbi Carvutto is a Reform rabbi with soft gray hair and one child, enjoying her first year in the profession at age 50. Reform rabbinical training places less emphasis on the Talmud and more on the Torah, the biblical portions, while requiring courses in psychology and education, preparing students for pastoral care. An energetic and bright-eyed 41-year old single woman, Rabbi Braun represents a third movement of Judaism — Conservatism — and was in the first graduating class of female conservative rabbis. "Within boundaries (conservative rabbis) interpret the legal traditions of the congregation," Braun says.

Differences between the movements exist on both a philosophical and a superficial level. The philosophical differences concern the *halacha*, or Jewish law, translated from the Hebrew to mean "the way to go" or "the way you walk." Orthodox Judaism believes in literal adherence to the words of the *halacha*, while Conservatives rely on the Rabbinical Assembly to ratify changes as adjustments to a changing world. For example, Orthodox Jews do not drive on the Sabbath, as starting up an engine is viewed as a form of work, which is prohibited. Conservative Jews, however, may drive to synagogue. "Some Reform and Reconstructionist Jews might choose not to drive to make the Sabbath more meaningful," says Carvutto, but the decision is personal, not religious.

But the variations of their movements strengthen the relationships of these women, rather than pull them apart. Each offers a different perspective. "[The differences] don't get in the way; it's a great education for me," says Braun.

This solidarity within diversity was amply demonstrated at the June 16 Hadassah tea at the Blaine House, organized by former president of the Portland Hadassah chapter Jane Lichtman and First Lady Mary Herman. Hadassah is the oldest Jewish women's organization. Braun, Carvutto and Smith were invited as guest speakers, educating their listeners about the history of women in their respective branches of Judaism. The result, Herman says, was "spellbinding." Their audience of more than 100 traveled from all over the state to attend. "What was particularly fun for me," says Herman, "was the attendance of women from rural areas." Carvutto appreciates Lichtman's and Herman's efforts. "Having a first lady who's Jewish has been a terrific boost for Jewish communities," she says. "Jewish women all over the state were very excited." After thoughtful consideration, Smith adds that it was notable to gather "the community together in such a public place, the seat of government even."



Rabbi Susan Carvutto



Rabbi Ruth Smith



Rabbi Carolyn Braun

shared characteristics — a passion to learn, a desire to make Judaism meaningful in their lives and to their congregations and, most obviously, their gender.

Every Thursday, Carvutto and Smith drive to Portland to join their colleague — and her dog, Molly Goldberg — at Temple Beth El. With 530 families in her congregation, the largest north of Boston, Braun has the most difficulty leaving her home base. The women gather to study the Talmud, the book of scholarly interpretations and notes on the Mishna, the first codification of Jewish oral laws. But these gatherings involve more than sitting around a table in Braun's book-filled office, pouring over texts and petting Molly. The meetings represent a celebration of each other — their Jewishness, their womanhood, their experience in Maine.

They became rabbis by completing rabbinical school and studying the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud, preparing to be both spiritual leaders and religious teachers. Unlike a minister, a rabbi does

weekly Torah portion for the Hebrew school.

"I fell in love with Talmud in rabbinical school," Carvutto says, adding, "the body of Jewish knowledge is so vast and deep...you learn in rabbinical school how much you don't know." Smith tells how important intellectual activity is in all of their lives by emphasizing that their meetings are "an opportunity to study at a high academic level," similar to that of her own training. She describes the time spent together as "very spiritual."

Braun, Smith and Carvutto all encourage congrega-

spending one Sabbath per month in Rockland. Braun's Portland congregation is too large for her to be directly involved in all educational matters — Smith and Carvutto tease her about the staff and office space that neither of them enjoy — but in between nightly committee meetings Braun teaches the

**B**raun, Carvutto and Smith all admit to initial anxiety about practicing in Maine, a state with low population density and very few Jews. Braun remembers thinking that "Maine would be nowhere Jewishly." But each woman has found the isolation she expected is not the reality. Smith worried about continuing an intellectual life with peers, a connection she has found in Braun and Carvutto.

The women are eager to point out that it's not only the female rabbis who support each other. There is "a wonderful group of rabbis in general," says Carvutto warmly. A group of three rabbis, known as the Beit Din, needs to gather when a conversion to Judaism occurs. In Maine, where there are great distances between rabbis, this could be a logistical nightmare. But Carvutto maintains the rabbis in Maine overcome this and travel great distances to fulfill the need: "We know we can count on each other."

Braun first visited Maine in 1978. When she considered a rabbinical position here she had "fantasies of sitting at a bakery, meeting people, studying." Although her schedule does not allow for that leisurely pace, she appreciates the opportunities the state offers. "In Maine, people are happy to have someone with energy and a good listener [as a rabbi]," she says. Carvutto is Augusta's first resident rabbi; she is excited to be a "pioneer."

Because Maine is removed from Jewish centers such as New York City, Braun believes being a rabbi here "touches upon being a woman" in that there is little focus on gender. Rabbi Larry Milder of Bangor echoes this statement saying, "Clearly, there is no difference in what a rabbi does or should be in terms of gender...any more than any personality trait."

Milder and Carvutto seem to have hit upon an explanation — Maine values. There are "shared val-

ues within the rabbinic community, both religious and social...they transcend questions of gender." Being rooted in a belief system that allows one to live a Maine lifestyle is crucial to the working of these Jewish communities. Carvutto says, "Because the state of Maine has certain values that attract a certain kind of person...people don't come seeking an affluent lifestyle and don't look to be competitive. This gets reflected in the ways [we] live in Maine."

That relaxed attitude is not maintained by all Maine clergy. Although Rabbi Harry Sky, former long-time rabbi of Braun's Portland synagogue, welcomes the introduction of the female perspective, he maintains that "men approach things one way, women another." He feels something is missing in the attitudes and service of contemporary rabbis. "We were always available...on vacation I would immediately get in a car or on a bus [to come back]." His family was a second priority: "[The rabbinate] was more than just a job, it was a calling." Sky doesn't find this same perspective among the younger rabbis, saying it could be a result of both age and gender differences.

Avis Smith grew up in Rabbi Sky's congregation. After being away for a time she has returned to Temple Beth El, working as the education director. She admits, "Times are different, the patterns of conservative Judaism have changed. It used to be very formal." In former years, there was more distance between the clergy and the congregation. With Rabbi Braun, "things have become more user-friendly." But it should be noted that Beth El has supported women in leadership positions for at least 35 years — the first conservative congregation in New England to elect a female president. "The notion of Judaism as something where clergy performed for you had its day in

the 50s and 60s," Avis Smith adds.

Being a female rabbi requires balancing a family with a career. If you have children, Braun says, "the congregation is half looking at you like you should be home with your family and half looking at you as if you should be with them." She feels there are different expectations of males and females. It would be viewed as inappropriate for a woman to bring her children to the pulpit during a sermon, but a male who did would be labeled "a man of the '90s," and applauded, according to Braun.

There is no disagreement that the rabbinate is more than a full-time job. Rabbi Smith has two pieces of advice for Jews — not only women — interested in becoming rabbis: 1) Know what your personal goals are. 2) Follow around a real rabbi. Smith stresses the importance of realizing what the job entails and recognizing one's strengths and weaknesses. "Some people are great sermon givers, some are community organizers," she says, indicating that she belongs to the latter category. "It's important to be excited; you need to transmit that." Rabbi Smith, Rabbi Braun and Rabbi Carvutto all feel the demands of a busy lifestyle, but they love what they do.

The general lack of gender-oriented talk by "The Three Traveling Rabbis" indicates that being a woman does not significantly shape their jobs. They operate in worlds more defined by their religious movements and personal characteristics than by gender. Yet being female is a resonant part of their personal lives, as their efforts to convene weekly show. Their womanhood draws them in and pulls them not away from their male colleagues, but toward each other.