

Reconciling Halakha with Equality

'It's a whole different ballgame when some man isn't shoving halakha down your throat'

Netty C. Gross New York

CAROL KAUFMAN NEWMAN, a 64-year-old grandmother of five, remembers growing up in the Bronx with a "gentler" Orthodoxy when grandmothers wore *sheitels* (wigs) but mothers went with their heads uncovered, synagogues had social dances, the prohibition against holding hands with a date was not enforced, and life was "generally co-ed."

"No wonder there weren't so many singles back then," Newman quips referring to a more liberal era when young people shared (she believes) healthier social relationships and religious fundamentalism hadn't yet seeped into modern Orthodoxy.

Newman's extended family members range from "shrimp to *shtrimmel*," she acknowledges cheerfully from behind her desk at the modest midtown Manhattan offices of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA), where she has served as president for the past three years. In mid-February, JOFA opened its 10th anniversary conference at a Saturday night event attended by some 850 participants at New York's Columbia University, under the banner, "Passion and Possibility."

"We love our Orthodox traditions but are seeking ways to comfortably reconcile halakha with equality," says Newman.

The walls of Newman's office are hung with photographs of traditional synagogue *mehitzas* or barriers, behind which women sit in Orthodox shuls. "Why do women still agree to sit behind those things?" Newman muses, shaking her blonde head and gesturing at the photographs. She herself prays at Darchei Noam, an egalitarian Orthodox-style minyan with a *mehitza* drawn down the middle of the aisle separating men and women in a more equal manner, and where women partake in Torah reading and in leading certain prayers.

That some women reject the *mehitza* and other seemingly discriminatory customs while others do not reflects the mixed attitude toward women's role in Orthodoxy in the 10 years that JOFA has been around.



CAROL KAUFMAN NEWMAN:
Finding a workable balance

JOFA burst on the Jewish scene as an organized movement in 1997, following a meeting of like-minded women who gathered "around the kitchen table" of the doyenne of Orthodox feminism Blu Greenberg.

Initial reaction to the concept was an uneasy mix of skepticism from non-Orthodox and non-Jewish feminists, who expressed doubt that Orthodoxy could be reconciled with feminist ideals, and discomfort from those who worried about tampering with tradition.

But Newman says JOFA has since found a workable balance in which "women can now make informed choices about their Orthodoxy."

On the organizational level, JOFA has grown into a mainstream group which boasts some 6,000 dues-paying members in the United States.

JOFA supports the work of scholars both in Israel and the United States seeking halakhic solutions to problems. "It is a communal failure that a solution has not yet been found," Newman asserts, warning that if rabbis don't start implementing suggested changes, Orthodox women are simply going to forgo religious ceremonies and will wed in civil courts."

The organization has also been active in improving gender education and awareness, publishing guidelines for Orthodox synagogues and schools. JOFA promotes changes such as welcoming women to stand on the *bima* (traditionally in the men's section) to mark life-cycle events

such as the birth of a girl and bat mitzvahs. In the area of education, parents are encouraged to ensure that prayer books and other materials are gender sensitive, teach both girls and boys to recite blessings and to read from the Torah.

For wedding ceremonies, JOFA advocates a slew of activities formally regarded as male-only. Newman is also hoping to launch a gender sensitive Orthodox siddur or prayer book.

She believes that the activism has paid off. The point of Orthodox feminism is to make one's decision out of knowledge and education and not because a man decides the modesty rules. It's a whole different ballgame when some man isn't shoving halakha down your throat, but that rather you have made an informed choice."

Still, Newman acknowledges some serious ongoing chafing against the more patriarchal elements of Orthodoxy, underscored by the thorny *aguna* (chained woman) issue, which bars women from remarriage if their husbands withhold a religious divorce. JOFA has taken a role in linking some 20 grass-roots groups, which help individual women get divorces when the husbands balk. She admits to being perplexed why more Jewish women, both in the U.S. and Israel, have not picked up the cudgel. "I guess it's like breast cancer. If you don't have a loved one suffering from it, you don't really care."

Newman also points with alarm to the pronounced shift to the fundamentalist religious right, a world to which many Orthodox women are newly drawn. The hard-line views of the Israeli rabbinate, particularly in matters of divorce is also being felt abroad.

Veteran feminist Phyllis Chesler, herself lapsed Orthodox, told the New York conference that Orthodox feminism is being tugged in opposing directions: by extremist liberals, who are anti-Israel in their political orientation and argue that the very notion of an Orthodox feminist "is an oxymoron," and the extremist conservatives.

But like Newman, Chesler underscores the general vibrancy of Orthodox feminism these days, and marvels at the growing ranks of learned women and suspects it's only a matter of time before learned women will be openly ordained as rabbis. ●