

## JOFA JOURNAL

### An Orthodox Feminist Speaks-In Response to Our Critics

By Adena Berkowitz

When I think of the Jewish Orthodox feminist movement these days, an old saying comes to mind: When everyone criticizes you, you must be doing something right. There is a certain irony in the fact that our movement has managed to get an extended range of criticism within our community. But, while these disparate Orthodox Jewish groups agree that Orthodox feminists are doing something wrong, they disagree on just what that something is.

Orthodoxy's great strength is its focus on obligation, in contrast to the global emphasis on rights. Yet when Jewish Orthodox feminists seek to take on more observance, they are accused of taking mitzvot that don't belong to them, of trying to change halakha or, at the very least, tradition in fundamental ways. Modern Orthodoxy is increasingly critiqued by those on the right as being too passionless, its adherents lacking in fervor. But when Jewish Orthodox feminists belie that argument by being more passionate about Judaism, by having more fervor about halakha, they become suspect. If they form women's prayer groups, if they seek the kavod of an aliyah in such a venue, if they read the megillah, they are accused of wanting to be like men and of diminishing the intent of tradition.

Then there is the opposite criticism -- Jewish Orthodox feminism has not done enough. It has not obligated Orthodox Jewish feminists to say kaddish for a parent. It hasn't made women's tefillah groups a daily requirement. It hasn't insisted that the movement obligate its adherents to take on additional mitzvot, whether incumbent upon women or not.

Finally, there are the ultra Orthodox women, who insist that Jewish Orthodox feminism is not relevant to Jewish women. These women decry the movement as a foreign body, representing the broader, secular culture and strictly off limits to Torah Jews. It would appear that Jewish Orthodox feminists cannot win. But the reality from inside is quite different. Anyone who has attended a women's tefillah group and has witnessed the face of a woman finally seeing what the inside of a Torah scroll looks like or reading from the Torah for the first time knows that that is a moment of transcendence.

Anyone who has heard a young girl singing anim zmirot understands that she is expressing a sincere love of yiddishkeit. The fact that many of these moments proceed in the face of much hostility and severe opposition makes them all the more remarkable. There are countless stories of the obstacles that women have faced when they wanted to say kaddish or study Talmud or even carry a sefer Torah within the women's section of their synagogue. That these efforts continue to go forward only serves to further demonstrate not only the dedication and sincerity of these women, but also their need to perform these observances to connect with Hashem. The seriousness with which many Orthodox feminists now take on additional mitzvot should also not be underestimated. In the last few years, my husband's company has hired interns and recent college graduates from a variety of schools including Barnard, Columbia and Stern Colleges. Increasingly, a request from the women is for a job perk, time to daven mincha in addition to a lunch hour.

The reality is that Orthodox Jewish feminism has lit a spark of greater commitment across the board of Orthodox women's lives. Intensive Jewish learning is increasing for women, even in the most right-wing schools, turning out perhaps the most educated corps of Jewish women in Jewish history. Even our sisters in the ultra-Orthodox world cannot ignore the changes that feminism has wrought for them. Women are confronting their rabbis where they see abuse of process, such as one woman who is suing to prevent an issuance of a heter meah rabbanim. And ultra-Orthodox women are taking to the public arena, holding their own conferences and loudly stating their points of view. Thus, despite the criticism, we move forward. For we know that knowledge of Torah and halakha, doing more mitzvot, studying more sacred texts, and taking on more obligations does not mean we are trying to be men nor does it make us mere dilettantes. It builds our spiritual lives, helping to make our love for tradition and daily commitment to Judaism ever greater.