

ON FEMINISM AND JUDAISM

Gilla Rosen

Radical feminist thought poses a strong critique of Jewish teaching. It often evaluates ideas on the basis of the gender of their authors rather than solely on the basis of their content. It exposes and indicts hierarchical patterns between men and women and social injustices perpetuated by men, and places them in the glaring limelight away from their extenuating social contexts. It approaches a culture with certain biases as to superior and inferior social frameworks. It does not begin from the same starting point and has no sense of a traditional sacredness, (This is not a specific attack on Judaism. Feminist thought also questions modern thought systems from Freudian psychoanalysis to anthropology. Even these "man" made systems are asked to re-evaluate assumptions.)

But the greatest threat posed to Judaism is indirect. Radical feminist thought so frightens religious people that they imagine they must reject all feminist ideas. Thus they often fight against ideas which would enrich their religious lives. Nor are they able to use criticisms as an inspiration to correct justly pointed out problems and excesses within the system. Sometimes age-old Jewish concerns are ignored not because they conflict with contemporary ideas but because they coincide with them.

Many observant and genuinely religious women are caught in a state of intellectual "schizophrenia". The young Jewish woman is glad that she was born in the latter half of the twentieth century. (What better historical moment for a woman - barring perhaps having had the chance to be at Mount Sinai in the flesh?). This is not only because of washing machines and dishwashers. It is changes in self-perception, status, role, educational opportunity, career, which have made the difference. Some of these changes occurred gradually but they are now classified in many people's minds under the general rubric of women's liberation or feminism. Thus religious women are given the impression that the beliefs underlying these changes (which have shaped them and which they genuinely appreciate) are antagonistic to their Judaism.

Many women, especially those approaching Orthodoxy as *baalot teshuvah* see themselves as having to make a choice between antagonistic world views. They may, for instance, eventually give up the "world of learning" which originally brought about their commitment. Even more women bury the problem. They are twentieth century women all week pursuing careers which fulfill their potential (trying to balance children and job, of course). On Shabbat there is an abrupt frustrating attempt at religious communion.

Feminism as a total ideology - a religion - is hopelessly inadequate. The encounter with feminism as an added perspective broadening one's views, challenging one's preconceptions and echoing at times vaguely felt emotions - is an enriching experience. Moreover, it is the actual experience of many Jewish women today. Feminism as a movement advocating women's rights and

opportunities is often at odds with the traditional social structures of Judaism. Nevertheless it is often at one with the social goals of Torah.

One of the paradoxical aspects of feminism is that there is no unified view of the nature of women (or men). Some feminists believe that women are radically different from men and that they need a "voice of their own". Other feminists emphasize that what is different about women is their experience of oppression - given the same opportunities as men they need to and will perform similarly.

Judaism has no credo about the nature of women either. A popular view of the Jewish woman and her role can be built up from various sources. Nevertheless, many great Jewish religious thinkers have held totally divergent views about women and their roles, as well as raising doubts about the validity of a generalization in describing the individual. The debate is as old as Adam and Eve.

The more radical feminist view which posits two very different worlds of men and women fits in easily with traditional attitudes and structures. It offers justification for patterns in which men and women live very separate and different lives. Many books and articles for religious women today, from Lubavitch to Beth Jacob, actually use feminist language to describe the uniqueness of the Jewish woman's religious experience. They are both a reaction to and a meeting of minds with feminism. Of course, eventually the radical feminist diverges totally when she rejects Jewish law as a "man"-made system, rather than a Divine system with different roles for men and women.

The liberal feminist view with its emphasis on women's equivalent potential, talent, etc. seems superficially more challenging to the system. Yet it is potentially more amenable to synthesis with the tradition. It is already implicit in the Torah's description of the creation of the human being "male and female" "in the image of God" despite the two-stage creation of Adam and Eve.¹ The feminist "demand" for equal rights for women in male domains need not be rejected outright as a foreign attack. It can be and is, sometimes, used as a stimulus to evaluate the halakhic possibilities of the increased participation of women in various religious experiences.

Modern religious women today may be seeking religious fulfilment and depth of commitment through what might be compared to either radical or liberal feminist paths. They may be seeking their own voice in Rosh Chodesh groups. Or they may be studying Talmud because "it is not enough to believe simply that the Torah is a gift from heaven; this belief must become a basic conviction, a burning passion, an experience of the order of 'to know'." As they pursue these endeavours are they feminists or simply religious beings? Has one led to the other?

There are a number of twentieth century responses which deal directly with the consequences of changes in women's self-perception. Three famous ones are the responsum of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, on

women's liberation and two responsa by Rabbi Yechezkel Weinberg. These responsa portray different evaluations of these twentieth century phenomena.

Rav Moshe's responsum relating to women's liberation passionately outlines the position of women as equal in Judaism. In fact, he deals with a most basic question – the definition of equality. He outlines the criterion for equality – does the Torah ascribe the same degree of holiness to men and women? Rav Moshe brings scriptural texts to prove that it unquestionably does. The fact that women are exempt from many commandments, he points out in totally non-apologetic fashion, is a *chok*. He then continues "and besides the reasons of the Torah which are not known to anyone, not even great sages, there are also obvious reasons" i.e. "that the raising of children which is the most important endeavour in the eyes of God and the Torah generally rests on the woman".

Rav Moshe concludes his responsum with strong words: "and there is no lack of respect for their dignity in the fact that women were exempt from the study of Torah and time-dependent mitzvot and there is no reason whatsoever to protest at all".

The onus is on the religious society really to value child-care as much as the performance of *mitzvot* and the study of Torah and also on the individual woman to adapt her perceptions and emotions.

Rabbi Yechezkel Weinberg does not deal directly with a feminism. Nevertheless, he addresses the same issues. However he sees women's difficulties as a genuine consequence of their situation rather than as a misreading of the tradition.

When examining the questions of batmitzvah for girls, and girls and boys singing *zemirot* together – he poignantly describes the modern young religious woman's dilemma. These "young women who have

studied languages and sciences have a sense of personal dignity and they see not being able to participate in the holy 'zmirot' as an insult and a rejection..."

Likewise "this discrimination which is made between boys and girls (in relation to Bar and Bat Mitzva) . . . deeply offends the human emotions of the young girl . . . who in other areas has already been 'emancipated' . . ."

Even more crucial, this acceptance of woman's emancipation which has certainly caused problems, has nevertheless been religiously positive. Comparing Eastern Europe to Germany (before the Second World War) he writes of these same young women "and we see and we know that the German 'Gedolim' have succeeded in the education of girls and young women more than the 'Gedolim' of the rest of the lands. And . . . we encounter women with a high standard of education who care profoundly for the law of Israel and keep the mitzvot with fervour."

Feminism has reminded the Orthodox Jewish woman that she can become both religiously learned and religiously passionate. She herself must be "equal but different" to religious women in the past. If awkward questions raise their heads along the way, the journey points heavenward nevertheless.

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Notes

1. Genesis 1:27.
2. Rabbi Soloveichik in *On Repentance in the Thought and Oral Discourse of Rabbi J. B. Soloveichik*, Pinchos H. Peli, Orot Publishing House, Jerusalem, 1980.
3. *Iggerot Moshe, Orach Chayim* Vol. 4, No. 49.
4. *Seridei Eish*, Vol. 2, No. 8.
5. *Seridei Eish*, Vol. 3, No. 93.

JUDAISM AND FEMINISM

Kate Loewenthal

I am deeply interested in Jewish women's issues, and wish I were better-equipped to address the issues I ought to be addressing. I ought to be more of a sociologist and more of a historian. I shall touch on sociology and history, and also draw on my own experience as a woman in Judaism – and in academic psychology.

My plan is to say something about feminism, something about women in Judaism, and something about the relations between feminism and Judaism.

Prior to the Industrial Revolution women's legal and political rights in Christian Europe were few. Within modern society industrialisation created the possibility of change – emancipation, suffrage and equality of opportunity. Feminism in the 60s and 70s pressed for more. There was not true equality of opportunity, women were the slaves of their own assumptions about themselves, as well as men's assumptions, as well as society's . . . there was sex discrimination, sexism in language, sexual harassment . . . By the 1980s, feminism had, I think, a lower media profile. Career women and crèches were facts of life. And, to be cynical, the middle-class family came to need a female as well as a male

breadwinner – as much as working-class families had generally done. Feminism had meanwhile changed its tune. By the 1980s, instead of demanding simple equality for women, it was demanding a sensitivity to the particular needs of women – for instance, 'interruptions' in careers to allow for childbearing and childrearing.

So much for my assumptions about social history, women's rights and women's roles. I should add that feminism is not a single ideological platform. Ann Oakley (*Subject Women*; 1981) identified ten distinct forms. To simplify the picture, she related each to one of two views about the origins of women's ills: socialist feminists identify 'the system' as the root cause, while radical feminists identify men as the problem. Then, ten years ago, 'the problem' seemed to be the confining of women to domestic roles, and lack of opportunity in the public workforce. The means of rectification were by social and political struggles. Now, there is more recognition of the importance of attention to individual attitudes and feelings, coupled with recognition of the woman's right to make an informed and enlightened choice about what she should and could do, or to discover