

# Judaism and Feminism: A Symposium

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When Kohelet wrote "of making many books there is no end", he may well have been referring to the present era. Jewish books especially continue to pour off the press in their hundreds, and one subject that never seems now to exhaust writer or reader is Jewish Feminism.

If the strident, aggressive Feminism of the nineteen-seventies and eighties has been replaced by a calmer and more rational tone, its challenge to traditional Jewish values remains undiminished. Is Jewish Feminism an outgrowth of non-Jewish ideology? Is it compatible with normative Judaism? Does the halakhah appear to discriminate against Jewish women in any way? What scope is there for feminist self-expression within Judaism? Does an authentic role still exist for a Jewish woman who wishes to devote herself exclusively to family and home?

These were amongst the questions we put to several leading authorities on the subject. Amongst the diverse views expressed, on one point there seems to be general agreement – that the feminist movement has produced a greater awareness among Jewish women of their intellectual potential and their specific role within Judaism.

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## THE APRON, THE BRIEFCASE, AND THE SEFER: IS FEMINISM COMPATIBLE WITH JUDAISM?

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About ten years ago, a provocative television commercial for a popular perfume, advertised a woman who, as she turned the catwalk, changed from business suit to apron to contoured sequined evening dress. This woman of the eighties had it all. She was assertive and important, yet feminine and maternal, and on top of it all, she was attractive; the woman other women love to hate. What the commercial neglected to tell the viewer was that this woman was tired, very tired. What tired the superwoman was not only running from the office to the kitchen to the theatre, but also society's, and most importantly, her own expectations of herself were exhausting. While media and public images of manhood changed marginally, women were presented with the awesome "burden" of achievement that was packaged with the promises of everything.

While this picture was certainly more palatable than the aggressive, unfeminine feminism of the sixties and seventies, it became increasingly less tenable and less attainable. Books and articles on trends for the nineties predicted that feminism was on the way out. A writer for the *New York Times*

analysis, instead of constituting more than half the human population. Will there ever be a course on men and Judaism? would we ever be able to sum up their role in a succinct and accurate paragraph to appear in some symposium? Doubtful. Often, I would just like to get on with existing and stop having to explain my existence.

But I also recognise, as did this feature writer, that something has changed. Language has changed. The way that women, Jewish women, talk about themselves, their goals, and their families is different. And before there will ever be a feminist revolution, their must be a linguistic revolution; the vocabulary women use to describe their lifestyles, or the lifestyles they desire, will precede any recognisable behavioral developments. In this respect, the subtlety of language indicates that the feminist message has penetrated even those women who most aggressively distance themselves from it. The desire for domestic conveniences, for leisure entertainment, for better childcare, for more equality in marriage, for a better standard of education for girls, and demands for greater privacy and independence have been expressed, if not acted upon, by all segments of the

Torah – “Anything new is forbidden by the Torah” chooses consciously to avoid modernity. The Reform and Conservative branches of Judaism, unconsciously embrace modernity. Then there are those who totter on the precipice of discernment. They neither patently reject nor accept, but selectively choose the aspects in secular society which are compatible with Judaism and reject those that are not. Obviously, this picture is grossly oversimplified; so much of our environment effects us subconsciously that the word ‘choice’ is essentially inaccurate. However, given this most basic graph, for those Jews who would ‘choose’ to have feminism have an influence on Judaism, how would that choice manifest itself?

Until now, what has made the word, if not the concept, of feminism distasteful to traditional Judaism, was the seeming emphasis on the woman leaving the domestic arena to pursue her own personal career or educational goals. Practically speaking, who would do the dishes? Who would watch the children? If these are perceived as the ‘real’ dilemmas by the Jewish community, then we are gravely mistaken. Men cannot keep women chained to household responsibilities for the convenience of pursuing their own personal goals, without any acknowledgement that the woman perhaps has her own agenda, or would like to cultivate one. One senses that these pragmatic concerns are the unexposed reason that feminism has become an anathema to religious communities today.

I would like to propose that if the Jewish community rejects feminism it is not for the petty purposes of housewifery but for the underlying philosophical statement about modernity that feminism seems to make. Namely, feminism is just another manifestation of the individual’s desire for self-expression and self-achievement, and that that self-orientation often bears the heavy price-tag of family and community. Ultimately it is the family and the community, not the self, that provides the parameters for healthy Jewish existence. If this is true, then feminism, indeed has no place in the Jewish community. But then, neither does the word ‘career’. For unlike ‘job’, career also implies a development of the self – educationally, professionally and monetarily – that so often comes at the expense of family and community, not to mention *limmud hatorah*. Yet, how many *rabbanim* actively dissuade male congregants from professional pursuits because of the ultimate philosophical cost to traditional Jewish values?

If we reject feminism because of its philosophy then let us be consistent, and let us put all of modern, secular values under microscopic scrutiny. Or in our

man’s requirement. Subsequently and most significantly, feminism may teach Jewish women the value of cultivating an independent spiritual existence. It seems that female spirituality is so often woven into the care for others that women have not learned to grow up spiritually on their own. While the Gemara in *Berachot* (17a) records that a woman’s merit is in sending her husband and children off to houses of prayer and study and in waiting for their return, what are those women doing for the many hours in between? If feminism has penetrated the Jewish community then let it have a spiritual dimension where women make greater demands on themselves in *tefillah* and *limmud torah*. The widespread ignorance of women of their own obligations in these areas is astonishing, but often no fault of their own. Classes for women are often on a very mediocre level and even those that are more intellectually rigorous are not always directed at informing women of their specific legal responsibilities.

These are basic guidelines for the laity. Yet however small their number, there are more and more women who constitute a religiously educated and responsible leadership for our community. This number of women must multiply exponentially if we are to have role-models of piety for our daughters and any unique feminine contribution to the world of *talmud torah*. I look forward to the time when I will open an anthology on Jewish thought and see a woman’s name (preferably more than one) in the table of contents. Today, if she is there at all, she has written an essay on women and Judaism. The women learned enough to write those articles may also be knowledgeable in *Tenakh*, in modern Jewish history or philosophy. But they are never asked to join the elite corps of the male dominated intellectual scene. They must prove themselves: the intimidating and lonely task of self-education and motivation that cannot always match their male counterparts. Until then, these women must be satisfied explaining themselves.

In conclusion, let us reject the feminism that cultivates pure self-orientation alone, and along with it reject other forms of secularization which condone the same philosophical notion that the self is more important than the sum of its parts. But let us inject into the spiritually lethargic women who have covered up their lack of responsiveness by hiding behind a wall of domesticity, that feminism can be a constructive force in building a religiously meaningful lifestyle if it pressures us to make spiritual demands upon ourselves.

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