



BLU GREENBERG

Putting Women Back in the Picture: A Celebration

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Scroll of Honor Essay by Blu Greenberg

I was blessed to grow up in a home that taught me that Judaism is much more than a collection of laws and customs to be practiced. My father and mother, z”l, made clear that Torah and tradition are a way of serving God by living a life of honesty, uprightness and *chesed*. Everyone who knew my parents understood that their commitment to Torah and deep faith enabled them to be this way. When I grew older, I understood this Judaism as a covenant, a partnership between God and humanity, and between the generations, as my parents sought to pass on to their family the values and commitments they had inherited.

I’ve also had the good fortune to be married to a man for whom covenant is a core of Judaism. *Tzelem elokim* – that every human image of God be treated as equal, unique, and of infinite value – infuses and informs all of his teachings and relationships.

So to me, JOFA has never been just about “expanding [women’s] spiritual, ritual, intellectual and political opportunities ...within *halakha*”, never just about freeing *agunot* or ordaining women. The purpose of JOFA was nothing less than to join society in moving closer to a just and equitable world; JOFA’s focus would be on a very small segment of the world—our own universe of Orthodox women. We understood that in this increasingly egalitarian society, Orthodox Judaism must reach for the biblical paradigm of men and women, created as equals, in the image of God.

How does a covenant between God and humanity work? Covenant involves compromise and forward motion, a process begun at Sinai. The Torah mediated between the ideal of gender

equality and realities of society. In 1250BCE, women could be bought and sold as chattels. The Torah's correction was that henceforth, a man could sell his daughter only to someone who would marry her and treat her as a free wife. [Ex. 21:6]. Another correction was to require a written *gett* which protected wives against the impulsive oral divorce that surely terrorized all Mesopotamian women. [Deut. 24]

The process continued -- with God counting on human partners in history to keep moving closer to the ideal. That is what Torah *sheh b'al peh* is about, and the function of Rabbis in every generation. Centuries after Sinai, the Rabbis added a ketubah with its financial protections. Centuries later, they forbade forcible divorce. In every generation, as women's status improved and conditions in society changed, the Rabbis sought to bring tradition closer to the Torah's ideals.

Each generation under the covenant takes the Torah as far as it can go until someday the messianic world of full equality will be attained. In this sense, we Jewish feminists are part of the *mesorah*, not outside of it, as some would have others believe. We are links in the unbroken and unbreakable chain on the way to redemption. We are transmitters of the *mesorah* to future generations, carrying forward covenant goals and ideals. It is those who hold back progress, hold women in personal limbo or diminish their humanity, who turn the precious chain of tradition into chains of injustice. But the task will not be put down until the covenant dream is realized, until our community is liberated from oppression of *agunot*, from denial of opportunity and leadership, religious experience and expression of its women.

One last word about covenant: We tend to think of 'covenant' in terms of Torah, the generations, Shabbat, marriage... But there is another dimension to covenant that I did not understand until I stepped down as president: that JOFA itself is a profoundly covenantal institution. Yes, gratefully, we've witnessed progress in women's learning, in leadership, *tefillah*, and life cycle ceremonies. Still, given Orthodoxy's naturally slow pace of change, given the resistance of some rabbinic authorities who equate Orthodoxy with no change, the goals

carried by JOFA could never be reached in discrete presidential terms. But in true covenantal fashion, the organizational structure enables others to step forward and carry on this sacred work.

I am deeply grateful to my co-honorees, to Carol who moved the organization to greater heights, greatly professionalizing it during her tenure, and to Judy, who took the reins after Carol. I know that both have taken JOFA along with them on vacations and deep into the nights. I am grateful to Zelda, generous Zelda, who has mentored for so many the model of principled giving, which she credits to her mentor, Barbara Dobkin. I feel grateful to the JOFA board— who give time, energy and soul to bring justice and betterment to the lives of others. And I want to remember those who were there from the beginning but are no longer —Esther Farber, Honey Rackman, and Natalie Friedman, z”l. I greatly appreciate the work of Robin and our dedicated staff who are a joy to work with, and I wish Robin well on her next challenge. I feel gratitude to the members of JOFA who walk this history together as a real force, and gratitude to friends present and not present, whose generosity enables our work to go forward. My special thanks to Giti and Jacky, Belda and Marcel, and Barbara and the dinner committee, for producing this wonderful event. And I thank my family, for always, always being the source of unadulterated happiness. I thank God for all these blessings, and for creating me a Jewish woman at this moment in history.

Plenty of work for JOFA remains. Tonight, we declare that we will neither tire nor cease. As Isaiah promised (40:31): “Those who trust in Hashem shall renew their strength; they shall run and not grow weary: they shall march and not grow faint.”