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Feminism in Religious High Schools

By Elana Maryles Sztokman

Last week, I had a conversation with a fourteen year-old religious Israeli girl that would have made any feminist proud. This young woman, whom I will call Yael, recently participated in a mixed prayer service in which women read Torah and led services. Not only was she excited and inspired, but she used the experience as a springboard for thinking about the status of women in Judaism, taking responsibility for her own actions, and aspiring to work at ensuring women's rights in society at large. Yael's seemingly natural ability to connect between the personal and political, between religion and culture, and between Jewish practice and gender messages, stirred in me the hope that today's teenage girls will throughout their lives carry a feminist consciousness embedded in their Judaism.

This hope, though, was short lived. Not an hour later, I sat with another eighth-grader, whom I will call Sara, who learns at the same school and is in the same class as Yael. Sara, who is one of the top students in her grade and has been accepted to the most exclusive modern-religious high schools in Israel, expressed with equal eloquence the age-old anti-feminist notion of gender differences based on biology and nature. She believes that girls are meant to be different, that our main charge in Judaism is to be modest (tznuot), and that women who want to read the Torah or participate in women's prayer groups are strange. She sees feminism as antithetical to religious Judaism, and, I must admit, she seems to be as comfortable as Yael in her gender identity. If I were to try to make an assessment about how girls in religious high schools are processing feminism, it would necessarily be incomplete, since it is clear that they speak in many varied and diverse voices. Clearly both Yael and Sara are working through the feminist agenda, but they are moving in very different directions, and are likely to emerge.

Certainly, Yael and Sara are alike in the fact that they are both grappling. Indeed, these young women are the first generation of religious girls to be exposed to aspects of feminist ideology. They are actually forming opinions about whether women should read from the Torah or form their own prayer groups. Concepts such as equality and voice are part of their lexicons. And most junior high school students will have been to a bat-mitzvah of an Orthodox girl who participated in some Jewish ritual that her mother could not have been part of twenty-five years ago. In that sense these girls have grown up in a different environment than did women even ten years ago.

Still, while the presence of a feminist consciousness can be detected in many religious educational institutions for girls, there exists alongside it confusion or ambivalence, as well as a pronounced resistance. The combination results in an educational environment in which navigation of the tension between religious ideals and feminist ideals is neither explicit nor examined.

Girls are indeed exposed to conflicting messages. Orthodoxy values communal needs while feminism values individual rights. Orthodoxy promotes obedience while feminism promotes resistance. Orthodoxy adheres to social hierarchies, while feminism advances equality. Orthodoxy considers a woman's voice to be sinful while feminism experiences a woman's voice as glorious. Orthodoxy views a woman's position as centered in the home, while feminism emphasizes public roles. These tensions are complex and profound. As difficult as it is for adult women to come to terms with the intricacy of it all, we can only imagine what it must be like for an adolescent so concerned with fitting into try and develop her own identity and belief-system.

I question whether religious educators truly confront these issues. Moreover, I submit that the conflicting messages girls receive are a reflection of the conflicting opinions of educators. Conversations with teachers in religious schools reveal serious discord on feminist issues. Many teachers both male and female cling to antiquated notions of femininity, insisting that a woman's role is to see to her house and children. Furthermore, messages of passivity abound. Girls are taught that their role in fighting societal injustice and pain is to recite psalms, and that they must serve as a support for their future husbands work. Yet, at the same time, there are teachers concerned with empowering girls to succeed on the matriculation exams and tackle challenging careers. Ironically, sometimes these conflicting messages originate from the same teacher, who has not considered the disparity between her secular and religious expectations of girls. Glaringly absent from conversations among religious educators is an integrated message for the girls, one that has emerged from an intense process of wrestling with the issues.

I am not trying to minimize the wonderful work of hard-working religious feminist educators. Nor am I suggesting that teachers must provide students with all the answers. The struggle itself is educational, and

our identities need not always be coherent and consistent. Nonetheless, I am advocating a better understanding of the experience of young religious women today. Because if we fail to appreciate their position, students will emerge confused, frustrated by the conflicting demands of the dual societies within which they live.

Already there are signs of the troubling impact that results from mixed educational messages: many twenty-something religious women have internalized notions of equality in the workplace but not in the home. These women work the second shift of housework, as well as the third shift of religious life, with expectations that they be career women and mothers of large families who are more than willing to sit quietly behind the mehitzah. The multiple pressures placed on young religious women are physically unhealthy, emotionally dangerous, and spiritually draining.

I would like to see more conversations around school conference tables centered upon the gender-identity development of young religious girls. I believe in the power of schooling to open up the mind, socialize, and challenge belief systems. I would like to think that educators can work with girls like Yael and Sara and help them sort out their individual issues surrounding gender and religion. I would like to see principals offering seminars and workshops to their staff on issues of gender identity in adolescence. Perhaps such programs will aid us in clarifying our own notions of what it means to be a religious woman and that will help us to be more sensitive, understanding, and challenging role models for our students.

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