

## Jewish women advance cause of Orthodox feminism

By Kim Mulford

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In the Orthodox synagogue Carol Kaufman Newman used to attend, the women worship in a balcony, out of sight of the men who gather near the Torah below.

The women follow a prayer book and they sing along with the service.

But whenever the New York City resident worships in a balcony, she feels distanced by gender from the sacred rituals of her faith.

The 64-year-old doesn't like that and she doesn't think her Creator intended things to be this way.

Ten years ago, Newman was one of a small group of women who gathered around a kitchen table in Riverdale, N.Y., and founded the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance. The advocacy group was created to expand the spiritual, ritual, intellectual and political opportunities for women while still respecting halakha (traditional Jewish law).

Today, Newman is president of the group, which is holding its annual conference this weekend in New York City. A couple thousand people are expected to attend, including women from South Jersey.

Carolyn Hochstadter Dicker of Cherry Hill will be there. A bankruptcy lawyer and mother of three school-age children, Dicker attends Congregation Sons of Israel, an Orthodox synagogue in Cherry Hill, where women are separated from the men by a divider.

"I go because I want to expand my level of learning and understanding," said Dicker, who helped organize the conference.

Dicker also founded a women's tefilla (or prayer) group, which meets in a private home in Cherry Hill. About 30 women attend the meetings, which are held several times a year. There, they are able to read from the Torah, celebrate bat mitzvahs, study together and take full part in the rituals.

"The level of learning and scholarship is so important," said Dicker. "Education is empowering and invigorating."

The annual conference in New York City includes speakers and workshops designed to inform women about issues that affect them. This year's focus is on agunah, the Hebrew word for a woman whose husband refuses to grant her a religious divorce.

Such a woman can be divorced through the civil courts, but still remain married in the eyes of her faith. Newman recounts stories of women whose husbands abandoned them, women who are trapped in abusive marriages and women whose husbands punish them by waiting until they are past their child-bearing years.

"We call it the unbreakable chain," said Newman, during a phone interview from the alliance's New York City offices. "If he's angry, he has the tools to use. We don't believe that God meant this to be a tool (to harm women)."

Orthodox feminism has come a long way in the last decade. It's not unusual:

for women to hold their own prayer services

for women to study the Talmud and the Torah

for women to share the Sabbath rituals of lighting candles, cutting the bread, making the traditional prayer over the wine

for mothers to bless their children on Friday night.

"You just see these roles changing," said Newman. "Nobody's shocked anymore."

They continue to change. Dicker is bringing her 15-year-old daughter, Michal, to the conference. The teen attends Stern Hebrew High School in Philadelphia, where boys and girls share the same learning opportunities.

Michal is part of a new committee of teens who are helping advance the feminist organization's goals among young people. She said she is inspired by the women like her mom who have worked hard to make Judaism more accessible for her.

"When one is reading from the Torah portion . . . you feel like you're doing something that people have done in previous generations. You're feeling part of what's been passed down," said Michal. "What I'm doing is crucial to the future of the Jewish people. It makes me feel more connected, like I'm part of it."

That's exactly what her Orthodox feminist sisters are working for.

Keeping the Faith looks at religion and spirituality in South Jersey. The column appears Saturdays. Reach Kim Mulford at (856) 251-3342 or [kmulford@courierpostonline.com](mailto:kmulford@courierpostonline.com).