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### Orthodox Feminist Education For Boys

By Zvi Grumet

For obvious reasons, many of the efforts of serious Orthodox feminism have focused on the education of women. There has, however, been little explicit focus on the educational implications of Orthodox feminism for the education of boys. My goal here is neither to describe the current situation nor to prescribe what should be, but rather to sketch a landscape of possibilities and lay out some of the challenges facing their realization.

My observations here are limited to all-male settings, although many are applicable to coed schools as well, especially those in which the sexes are separated for Jewish studies classes. Sensitizing people to issues which are not their own, as is often the case with feminist issues in all-male environments, is especially difficult. This creates a significant challenge requiring special effort and commitment, but it is eminently doable.

The overall goal of a feminist-sensitive educational program for boys is to help bring an awareness to young men that the Jewish experience for women is profoundly different from their own, that in many instances those differences are experienced negatively by women, and that there is room, both within the halakhic system and within social structures, to enhance the experience of women.

Let us imagine the possibilities of such an education. One of the rabbanim in the school serves on a *beit din* (religious court) that seeks out recalcitrant husbands and facilitates *gittin* (religious divorces). He involves his students in public activity aimed at pressuring the husband, has students help set up videoconferencing facilities for *shlihut* (the halakhic apparatus for appointing an agent) to empower the *beit din* to write the *get*, and gives classes on the importance of pre-nuptial agreements and the need to find vehicles to prevent and remedy *agunot*. In a class on prayer the blessing *she-lo asani ishah* (who has not made me a woman) is discussed, a class on laws of Shabbat includes investigation of women's obligation in *kiddush* and *havdalah*, and preparatory classes for the of women with regard to the various commandments, including reading the *megillah*, participating in the *Pesah seder*, and lighting Hanukkah candles.

While the issues mentioned above are certainly substantive, the discussion surrounding them does not raise the same level of passion and concern as do those that challenge traditional perspectives on male and female roles and impel boys towards a redefined masculinity. Even when matters are not halakhically problematic, there is often emotional and visceral resistance to change. For example, it is difficult to find halakhic opposition to women's *zimmun* (leading the grace after meals in the company of three women); indeed, most opinions hold that it is a requirement. Despite this consensus, the fact that until recently the practice was rare generates discomfort among boys when women actually recite *zimmun*. Similarly, it is hard to make a strong halakhic argument against women saying *kiddush* or *ha-motzi* at the Shabbat table, yet many boys (and men) react negatively to the suggestion. Even the question of advanced Torah study for women generates unease in traditional circles. When it comes to issues around which there is substantive halakhic debate, such as women's prayer groups, Torah reading for women, public *megillah* reading by women, and women in positions of public office, the resulting opposition is greatly magnified.

In a realm in which public policy reasoning, schools can make an impact by teaching by example. Schools can sponsor communal study sessions on women and halakhah, appoint women to school leadership positions, and hire female faculty members to teach Judaic studies. While I have seen many of the above suggestions successfully implemented, the intensity of communal resistance to change should not be underestimated. I can still recall finding an outstanding female Bible teacher for an all-male class; unfortunately (Nehama Leibowitz's example notwithstanding), significant elements within the community were unprepared to have a woman teaching Judaic studies to boys.

The changing role of women in Orthodox society demands that young men educated in our schools be prepared to address, and perhaps adjust, their conceptions of what is possible and acceptable. Still, a number of challenges stand in the face of implementing an Orthodox feminist education for boys. Communal institutions often struggle with the question of who leads is it the community that sets the agenda, hiring professionals to implement it, or is it the leaders who pave new paths for the community? In schools, the parent body, the educational committees, the financial powers, the communal rabbis, the teachers, and the educational administration each believe they should chart the course of the institution. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for any of the above to successfully pursue an agenda without garnering support, or at least avoiding opposition, from some of the others. For example, a principal may be committed to exposing the

students to an Orthodox feminist agenda, but without appropriately sensitive teachers, or in the face of opposition from local rabbinic figures, he will find the task daunting if not impossible.

Vital to implementing any change is a realization that the Orthodox Jewish community is inherently conservative and can be nudged, but not shoved. Fidelity to tradition is the sine qua non of Orthodoxy and any agenda suggesting a departure from tradition is viewed with suspicion, as any Orthodox feminist well knows. Any attempt to introduce gender-sensitive education for boys must ensure that the integrity of the halakhic process is preserved. Further, the richness of halakha often supports a range of possibilities, including those not pursued heretofore as a result of communal pressures. Opportunities for new communal and familiar roles for women must be achieved by balancing openness to new avenues of halakha and sensitivity to tradition.

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