

ORTHODOX/FEMINIST: NO LONGER AN OXYMORON

by *Suzanna Friedman Hochstein*

A few months ago, we celebrated our oldest granddaughter's Bat Mitzvah. Of course, it was wonderful, but more than that, it was an affirmation of my aspirations as an Orthodox feminist, and as such, it brought tears to my eyes. I think my children thought they were tears of emotion at my granddaughter's perfect, self-assured, and confident *leyning* of the *parashah*, which she read from the *Sefer Torah* that my father had written (when I was a budding feminist and he a male chauvinist, could either of us have imagined this?), but really, they were tears of joy at the knowledge that I had helped move a mountain.

When I was growing up in New York, my family celebrated my twelfth birthday just as they celebrated every birthday—with an atonal rendition of “Happy Birthday to You,” sung with loving alacrity, and a somewhat more special present: a gold Jewish star on a chain, my first “piece” of jewelry. The difference of this birthday was captured in the sentence, “Now, when you fast, it's for real.” That was it. A Bat Mitzvah celebration wasn't for us, the Orthodox. A Sweet Sixteen party was more appropriate! In retrospect, years before Betty Friedan and *The Feminine Mystique*, my covert feminism was already at play—I refused to have a Sweet Sixteen party.

I read Betty Friedan's book in college in one sitting and was absolutely blown away. However there was nothing in the book to help me make the connection between being a feminist and being Orthodox, and I lived with that dichotomy for decades. After we made *aliya* almost 40 years ago, I went to meetings of feminists in Israel; I joined the Israel Women's Network; I learned enough to make me realize that a lot of what we accept as givens are actually a matter of interpretation; and I discussed, argued, and shouted my frustration with my family, my friends, and anyone I could buttonhole into listening to my sometimes strident expressions of anguish. But the feminist and the Orthodox remained two separate compartments of my life.

Together with friends, in 1988 I helped to found Matan: The Women's Institute for Torah Studies in Jerusalem. We took the first small steps toward changing perceptions in Israel of what women could accomplish by demonstrating that women are not only allowed to learn

but that they also have the intellectual capacity to learn Talmud as well as *Tanakh*, Jewish philosophy, and halakha. The hole in my soul began to shrink.

When my daughters were in elementary school, some of their teachers were from Beis Yaakov schools. In contrast, none of the teachers teaching my granddaughters today are from Beis Yaakov schools; some are Matan graduates, and all are university graduates. For the most part, my granddaughters can differentiate between what is written in the text and what is *midrash*. When I was a child, text and *midrash* were all jumbled together, and many things I thought were textual were not.

When my older daughter was 11, I took her with me to a community that had separate *hakkafot* and readings for and by women on Simhat Torah morning. She was there for my *hakkafa*, danced with the Torah, and was beside me when I had an *aliya*. But that experience couldn't erase the memory of the night before, when we were in our own shul. For the first time my husband had brought a Torah into the women's section, and some women and many of the girls danced. A number of women from my husband's family were there—and they turned their backs on us.

A few months later, I began my campaign. My daughter was born on the 15th of Av, which is traditionally perceived as the day of women, when, according to Mishnah *Ta'anit* 4:8, rich and poor girls exchanged clothes and danced in the fields and the men could choose a bride without consideration of her wealth or family *yichus*. I tried to persuade my daughter to put off her Bat Mitzvah celebration until Simhat Torah so that we could have a separate reading for and by women. I told her that she would be the star, the center of attention, as befits a girl coming of age and becoming part of the *kehilla*. At one point she looked at me and said, carefully and politely, "Why would I want to have a Bat Mitzvah to which most of my family wouldn't come?" And then I knew the fight was over. She had a wonderful Bat Mitzvah, she gave two *divrei Torah* that she wrote after months of learning with a young woman, and I was filled with pride—but it wasn't the Bat Mitzvah celebration that it could have been.

My younger daughter was born between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, eight years later. By that time there was Matan, and people—even in Israel and even in my husband's family—were more aware of women as learned members of the Modern Orthodox community. Of course she would have the Bat Mitzvah celebration that I wanted. But no. It was what I wanted; it wasn't yet what she wanted. The most I was able to wring out of the family—and the shul—was that she gave a *d'var Torah* in shul, standing at the slightly opened *mehitza*, and our sons (under duress) and my husband threw candies at her from the men's section. My husband and our sons got the *aliyot*.

Years later this same daughter invited us, her siblings, and a handful of friends to her *minyán* in Jerusalem to hear her read the *haftarah* for the first time. Afterward, she said she felt like it was her Bat Mitzvah. In 1998, I was part of the group that founded Kolech: The Religious Women's Forum, in Israel. At the first exploratory meeting I discovered that there were many others like me. There was a world of women out there who wanted to expand the box into which the rabbis and Orthodoxy had put us, so that we could grow and stretch to the

limits of what halakha actually allowed. My husband, our daughters, our sons, and even my late father, who was then in his nineties, attended the Kolech conferences. They heard, and they internalized what they heard.

When I asked my older daughter what her daughter would do to mark her Bat Mitzvah, she gave me a look of barely concealed pride and said, “She wants to read the whole *parashah* and the *haftarah*.” When I asked where, she said that of course it would be in their shul, in a separate room, with the door open so that the men in the next room could hear her. There would also be a reading by a man in the main shul for those who couldn’t or wouldn’t go to hear a woman read. And, as I described earlier, it was amazing. She read the *parashah*; her mother, grandmothers, and aunts got the *aliyot*; and she gave the *d’var Torah*.

I asked my daughter what her second daughter would do for her Bat Mitzvah. By then, she explained, every girl would take at least a part in reading the *parashah/ haftarah*. By then it would be a given.

So now I know—there is such a thing as Orthodox feminism, and I am an Orthodox feminist. Even now, I worry that the struggle to expand women’s roles in Orthodoxy is still a minefield and vigilance remains the watchword. Yet, even if my daughters won’t define themselves as Orthodox feminists, I am not disturbed. They won’t define themselves as feminists because to them it’s passé. It would be ludicrous to tell them they can’t—they know that they can. God willing, so will my granddaughters

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