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Our Tradition Ourselves

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Several years ago, a community established an Orthodox synagogue in a suburb of New York. Its founders are religious centrists and professionals comfortable in the secular world: accountants, lawyers, health care providers, computer programmers and teachers. Many of the women work outside their homes. Their school-age children attend *yeshivot* and day schools. The men wear knitted *kipot*, and most of the women do not cover their hair. They are, in short, a typical modern Orthodox community. When designing their new synagogue, they originally built a *mehitza* close to the bima that allowed women to see (through tint-equality, or do we abandon those notions of justice and apply another set of values to our religious path? This brief essay will point to some of the major tenets of feminism as they come to bear upon Orthodox feminism.

What is Feminism?

Today and at its inception, at the end of the 18th century, feminism was and is, not a monolithic response to what was called the women's problem. Historically, it is diverse and culturally varied, perhaps because women are many and not one. One cannot speak of feminism but rather of feminisms. Liberal feminism and radical feminism are two of the major theoretical and practical branches of the women's movement.

A basic tenet of liberal feminism was and still is that the subordination of women is rooted in a legal system that blocks women's entrance into the public domain. Exclusionary policies are both the source and the result of this discrimination. Liberal feminists demanded that the rules of the game be fair and just, so that women could enjoy the same rights and access to opportunities as men. Radical feminists, on the other hand, questioned the essential nature of societal arrangements. They posited that the truths emanating from political, legal, and social establishments served the interests of male hegemony, which was firmly rooted in power, dominance and hierarchy. Radical feminism stressed gender differences, primarily based on the biological reproductive powers of women. However, they completely rejected using difference as a basis to justify inequality, as did their conservative counterparts. Most radical feminists do not adhere to the notion that biology is destiny. Rather, they claim that many of the differences between men and women are deeply socialized and embedded in an environment where male power is at the root of social construction.

All feminisms, including modern Orthodox feminism, claim that what is does not serve as a justification for continuing the status quo and certainly is not necessarily what ought to be. All feminisms are concerned with exclusion and invisibility. And so we ask: is gender inequality in Orthodox Judaism really God given? Perhaps there are other ways of conceptualizing and expressing the nature of our womanhood, our rights, our obligations, and the character of our relationships. These matters are central to the Orthodox feminist agenda.

The Challenge of Jewish Orthodox Feminism

One of our essential dilemmas derives from the fact that in many aspects of our secular lives we are equal and full citizens. We would not tolerate our daughter's rejection from medical school based upon her gender. If she were to sit behind the wall in law school and not be granted the degree in the end, we would be outraged and act upon our anger. However, with regard to our Jewish identity and practice we are largely spectators and enablers. Even those with broad and deep mastery of Judaic knowledge continue to have limited access to formal power. Women can be lawyers and judges but not *dayanot*; women can be political advocates but remain *agunot*; women can be public speakers but not *hazaniot*; women can master Torah *she?baal peh*, but not be *poskot*. These circumscribed roles create spiritual, psychic and social predicaments for us. They heighten dissonance in our thinking and hurt our spirits.

As Orthodox feminists, we are trying to make sense of our inequality. We are giving voice to something that for so long remained unspoken. The vehemence of our critics attests to the potency of the threat they sense to patriarchal Judaism. Beginning from the time of Rav Kook, rabbinic authorities perceived feminism as a secular movement by and for the *goyim* (see Rav Kook's teshuva of 1919 barring women from participating in the *yishuv* voting). Rabbi Meir Twersky calls our feminism ideational assimilation; Rabbi Meiselman terms our struggle sundry topics in feminism.

Perhaps one of the striking differences between the women's movement and Orthodox feminism is that the former not only believes in change but also that women are powerful agents of change. Orthodox feminists hope that our knowledge will get us power, yet we still abide a system where change is legitimate only when sanctioned by the interpretations of *gedolim*, who seem to be reluctant to explore relevant *halakha* even in

legitimate ways. What our critics miss is that the impetus for our feminism comes precisely from our passionate Jewish commitment. We are accused of betraying Jewish tradition by introducing alien notions into it. We are challenged to forever demonstrate our religious commitment and obedience. We are constantly proving that we are *frum* enough, motherly enough, and that we also never burn the *chulent*.

We must not engage in this conversation from an apologetic stance. On the contrary, we are raising pressing questions and are attempting to craft viable answers. As part of the traditional community, we believed the problem to be *halakhic* and therefore, we looked for *heterim* (dispensations) and legal precedents. Yet, when we found them, we were surprised that not only were they not adopted by a majority of the religious community, but that the conversation then became meta-halakhic, delegitimizing our options. Secular feminists learned this same lesson. Legislation for equal education and suffrage did not end women's subordination. Long-time limited roles had petrified notions of the ideal woman, and oppression endured. Attitudinal changes simply cannot be legislated. It is our challenge to find *heterim* but also to struggle with the socially constructed images of women and men that frame our basic visions of ourselves and our understanding of *halakha*. Most important, Orthodox feminism must not be seen only as a women's movement for solving the women's problem. Discrimination and the silencing of women in the tradition are problems for all of *klal yisrael*. Orthodox feminism asks what it means to be *nivrah betzelem* (created in the image of God). This is not a women's struggle. It is one that summons everyone. Our success without knowing what the final product will look like will be measured against how completely we enlist the whole community to join the struggle. I look forward to the day that our rabbis, husbands, fathers, and sons feel spiritually compromised in a community where *kavod hatzibur* (respect for the congregation) means the absence of women.