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### Perhaps Next Year

By Esther Hildary

I consider myself a feminist. My husband does not. The first weekend we were married my husband, after making a beautiful kiddush, turned to me and asked me to make hamotzi. I laughed and waved him off feeling suddenly awkward and uncomfortable. Four years have passed since then and little has changed. I am an educator and a reader. I make a point of promoting women's causes both inside and out of the classroom. I even consider myself well versed on a variety of religious subjects. Yet, when it comes to engaging in male-dominated religious rituals, my confidence suddenly dissipates and I find myself left with nothing more than a profound reluctance.

While there can be no simple answer to this question, I cannot help but ask if this hesitancy is a manifestation of my Sephardic Jewish identity. I wonder, as I often do, if being a Syrian feminist is by definition difficult. An initial response to this query yields an emphatic yes. Growing up in the center of Brooklyn's close-knit Syrian/ Sephardic community, I was always aware of, and disturbed by, the none-too-invisible line dividing the sexes. Even in the most liberal synagogues, women's voices were rarely heard and their inclusion in the services were quaint concessions at best. The fact that most of the community's women had never attended yeshiva and had little knowledge of Hebrew language and halakha made these distinctions inevitable. Today, however, much has changed. Almost all the young women in the community attend schools where they are taught as much about Judaism as their male counterparts.

The time for change is therefore at hand. Why then is it so slow in coming? Often, closed communities are plagued by the very things that make them strong. The lifeblood of the Syrian community, which many marvel at for its low assimilation rate and continued growth and prosperity, is its fervent attachment to tradition. In the minds of many, the ways of our fathers are to be sanctified and treasured rather than disregarded or altered. As the community's children grow older, therefore, they tend to return to, rather than fly away from, the nest. In a similar vein, the Conservative and Reform movements, as well as the feminist movements with which they are often mistakenly aligned, are viewed with ill-concealed disdain.

Many in the community feel that what lies at the heart of these movements is a disrespectful and potentially dangerous distancing from time-honored traditions. Unfortunately, such attitudes have been exacerbated in recent years by the rising tide of ultra-orthodoxy within the community. While traditional Sephardic Judaism has the spirit of progressive Maimonidean thinking at its core, of late this has been replaced by a more fear-driven and reactionary attitude toward cultural and religious innovation. The topic on the lips of many in the community is modesty. In such an atmosphere the drive to create a space where women can be seen and heard has been roundly condemned. A woman in the community who may sincerely wish to express herself spiritually and ritually is therefore placed in the difficult position of having even her most private and personal engagements with Judaism become the subjects of communal criticism. Such politicizing of religious engagements makes my reaction to my husband's request more understandable.

In making hamotzi I would also be making a statement about myself, my community, my religious philosophies, and my political agendas. The burden of all this would taint my ability to sincerely connect with the experience. While all Modern Orthodox women seeking to make a space for themselves must carry similar burdens, the Sephardic woman is perhaps unique in that she carries an awareness of her communal connections with her at all times. She feels no desire to change the status quo, because she recognizes the importance of maintaining the integrity of the community's structures. The line between private and public religious engagement is indistinct for her and therefore constantly in flux.

Members of the community seeking to balance the scales for women therefore face a difficult task. They must find a way to help the community grow without forcing it to change. Unfortunately the centers of growth at local schools and synagogues are led either by ultra orthodox factions or by men who lack the motivation to truly assist in promoting women's causes. However, many women have begun taking matters into their own hands. Small groups of women in some synagogues have requested their own prayer groups. Many women have begun attending classes at Drisha and some young women have been spending a year in Israel. Bat Mitzvahs have become more commonplace and many women are working at a fevered pitch in the areas that have historically been their domain. Bake sales abound, chesed projects and organizations gain more momentum each year and women's learning groups and Tehillim gatherings are commonplace. These activities indicate that many women in the community are anxious to find spiritual fulfillment in whatever way they can.

Growth is a difficult process. Every Rosh Hashanah we re-confront our flawed and fractured selves and contemplate the ways we will mend our futures. Very quickly though we learn that meaningful developments, on both personal and communal levels, are slow in coming and often involve stretching our thoughts and perceptions in uncomfortable, if not painful, directions. Looking around at my complex community, I note the dynamic women who have taken the first steps toward establishing a more consciously egalitarian Sephardic community. Perhaps my own small acts will in and of themselves help to move the community forward. Perhaps this year I should make hamotzi with a clear conscience.

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