

Rosner's Guest

Shmuel Rosner, Chief U.S. Correspondent

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Rebecca Honig Friedman

Rebecca Honig Friedman is Senior Writer for [Jewess](#), a blog about Jewish women, and a regular contributor to the [The Lilith Blog](#), where her column, "The Jewish Beat", appears every Friday (another Lilith guest, [Susan Schnur](#), was here a couple of weeks ago). In addition to freelance writing, she works as a producer for documentary film and television programs, having contributed to projects as diverse as a PBS documentary about abstinence-only sex education in Lubbock, Texas to a hip-hop celebrity poker television series (don't ask).

In her mid-twenties, Rebecca holds a BA in English from Yale University and is the product of a modern Orthodox day school education. She lives with her husband on Manhattan's Lower East Side, where she was born and raised.

Dear Rebecca,

My question is about a topic I find the most fascinating of all the issues concerning Jewish women today - that is, the change in status and approach of modern Orthodox women. Let me ask you these two most difficult questions:

- 1. Is it really a revolution?**
- 2. How far will it go?**

**Best,
Rosner**

Good questions. Before answering I want to clarify a bit what I think you mean by the "change in status and approach of modern Orthodox women." It's the idea that women can and should have the same access to all facets of Jewish life that men do, wherever the law permits. The Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) is the embodiment of this new approach and sums it up well on its website: "JOFA works to expand the spiritual, ritual, intellectual and political opportunities for women within the framework of halakha." Some practical examples include women's prayer groups, women's Torah reading, women learning Talmud at the highest levels, women taking on leadership roles in synagogues. These are things that were just not done forty years ago, or even twenty or fifteen years ago, and that are still controversial in many Orthodox - even in modern Orthodox - circles.

But it's important to note that while some more right-wing Orthodox might accuse these women of compromising halacha, if anything the women who are seriously pursuing these controversial activities are often more strictly observant -- because they are more educated in Jewish law -- and more engaged in Jewish ritual and spirituality -- because they can be -- then their predecessors.

Yet, to get back to your questions, while they are willing to be controversial to a certain extent, most modern Orthodox women would have a hard time with the word "revolution," inasmuch as it

implies an actual break with the status quo. Most people who affiliate as modern Orthodox are very insistent on the *Orthodox* part, they very much want to be seen as acting in accordance with halachic Judaism. No one at the JOFA conference is talking about changing halacha or breaking halacha, rather they talk about interpreting halacha in ways that reflect a more modern and feminist approach to Jewish life. Most modern Orthodox women are not willing to act without some sort of sanction by a nominally Orthodox rabbi. Fortunately, there are those modern Orthodox rabbis who are sympathetic to the feminist Orthodox cause.

That said, there are those stalwarts of the Orthodox feminist cause -- Tova Hartman would be one prime example -- who are growing so frustrated with the majority of Orthodox rabbis' lack of sensitivity to women's rights, particularly on the agunah issue, that they are talking of revolution, if not in name than certainly in idea. At this year's JOFA conference, there were a few mentions of the idea of breaking with the (ultra-)Orthodox establishment: Sharon Shenhav, the only woman to serve on the commission appointing Israeli rabbinic judges, suggested creating an alternative, modern Orthodox rabbinical court, and Tova Hartman suggested that at a certain point, the leadership of rabbis who disregard women's rights should become invalid, that we should stop asking those rabbis questions about kashrut, for example (The latter suggestion, it should be noted, met with silence from the crowd.) So while the majority of what might be called "lay" modern Orthodox women aren't there yet, those at the forefront of JOFA do seem to be increasingly ready for something bordering on revolution.

As to how far this revolution, if that's what it is, will go, it seems to already be leading to a new movement that sees itself as being within modern Orthodoxy. Perhaps not even a movement yet, but a different approach, called "open" or "progressive" Orthodoxy, at the center of which is Rabbi Avi Weiss' new rabbinical school, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. This approach is still Orthodox in name, still insistent on adherence to halacha, but more willing than the modern Orthodox establishment to look for loopholes and interpretations that make halacha more inclusive and open to progressive values. I think this approach will keep growing and it will create a rift within modern Orthodoxy - those on the left affiliating as progressive, those on the right affiliating as modern.

On a practical level, will there ever be women rabbis who call themselves (modern/open/progressive) Orthodox? I think so, but I have a feeling they won't be getting ordained by Yeshiva University or recognized by the Rabbinical Council of America anytime in the foreseeable future.