

**Choosing Limits, Limiting Choices:  
Women's Status and Religious Life**

A conference presented by the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute  
and JOFA: the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance  
March 13-14, 2005  
Brandeis University

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**Is Jewish Orthodox Life Threatened by Changing Gender Roles?**

**Moderator:** Rabbi Benjamin Samuels, Congregation Shaarei Tefillah  
Sylvia Barack Fishman, Brandeis University  
Blu Greenberg, founding president, JOFA  
Tamar Ross, Bar Ilan University

**Annie Sandler:** I'm from Norfolk, Virginia, and I chair the Hadassah Brandeis Institute (HBI) board. I'd like to welcome you this morning. The conference started last night, and I hope everyone was here, it was absolutely amazing. I remember the initial conversations when Sylvia Barack Fishman and Phyllis Hammer brought the idea to the HBI board, but I had no idea OF the depth of the conversation and the issues that were going to be discussed and dealt with. I thought that it was more than a little interesting last night when, during the question and answer period, Dr. Hartman looked over at Sister Boys and said, "I could change the heading on the *responsa* I have from the rabbinic court or authorities, and I could put "diocese" on the top. It's the same conversation. It's the same issues." And so the fact that JOFA and HBI partnered to bring this conference to you, and together have brought you these incredibly important conversations I think is wonderful, and I hope that we're able to partner more. I think it strengthens both organizations and makes us that much more important and makes the conversations that much more important.

**Idana Goldberg:** Good morning. I'm vice president of programming and education at JOFA, and I'm really thrilled to see everyone today.

According to the *kabbalah*, when God created the world, God engaged in *tsimtsum*, a divine contraction of self. The *Torah* enjoins the Jewish people to be an *am kadosh*, a holy people, which commentators explain as a people distinguished from others through God's commandments. Ingrained in Jewish belief and action is the idea that holiness and creativity arise from limitations. Living as an Orthodox Jew entails restrictions and limitations through which a relationship with God is forged and a cohesive community formed. By choosing to live as Orthodox Jews, both men and women choose limits, on their time, dress, food, sexual behavior. In our context today, however, the title of the conference questions not why Orthodox Jews choose limits in choosing Orthodoxy, but specifically how Orthodox women navigate their choices within a tradition, a religion, a community that limits choices. But if Orthodox Judaism is about limitations on all its adherents, then why focus on the particular limits faced by Orthodox women? I would suggest that it is because Orthodox Jewish women are disproportionately limited on account of their gender, in a way that is qualitatively and theologically different from the limitations faced by Orthodox Jewish men. It is because women have been excluded from the power to shape and implement the laws and regulations that nonetheless bind them. It is because the limitations faced by Orthodox women are those that often fly precisely in the face of those values of equality that women have come to expect in the rest of their lives. Is it the same thing to choose not to eat a cheeseburger as to choose to not be counted in a *minyan*? Can we equate our cessation from work on *Shabbat* with the cessation of a women's ability to bear children when she is left an *agunah*? It is the same to fast on *Yom*

*Kippur* as to starve women from the bread of *Torah*? For many observers and even participants, the question is simple: Why do Orthodox women choose to be limited? And the answer for them is even clearer: If a woman is so limited, she should exercise her choice otherwise, abandon Orthodoxy and find her freedom elsewhere.

Yet I believe that for many observant women, understanding their affiliation with Orthodoxy as a choice is a misnomer. For them, Orthodoxy is a belief, an identity, one that seems no more optional than their gender or even breathing. Orthodoxy is a web of invisible connectors binding them to their mothers and grandmothers, sisters and daughters, their past and their future. For these women, the choices referred to in the title of the conference are not simply those of identity or affiliation, but rather the more complicated choices made by observant women who live fully within the system.

Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of women making two kinds of choices. The first group is those who choose to accept the differential limitations in their Jewish lives. In 1866, when Eastern European Jews were first experiencing their own encounter with modernity, the poet Judah Leib Gordon suggested that Jews should be men in the streets and Jews in their home. For these Orthodox women this dictum now reads: "Be feminist in the streets and Jews at home." Many Orthodox women lead feminist-infused lives in the secular professional realm, yet choose to maintain traditional gender roles within their homes, synagogues, and communal organizations. Yet this bifurcation of identity does not sit well for all Orthodox Jewish women. A growing number seek an integrated identity that allows them to maximize their own religious growth through increased opportunities within their Judaism. Women who are effecting change in the Orthodox community are making choices in order to do so: what they learn and how they

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use that knowledge, how they divide family responsibilities, how they fulfill commandments and celebrate Jewish events. Both kinds of Orthodox women are cooperating with and maintaining Judaism as a religious system, and perhaps the most central questions this conference addresses are the factors and considerations that persuade these women to exchange their own limitless autonomy for rabbinic authority, their personal sense of ethical responsibility for that of the community. As Orthodox communities, like religious communities across the world, become more conservative, why would women continue to choose to affiliate with those that define them precisely in opposition to values of equality and opportunity for women? In these circles, feminism is perceived as a radical movement that will destabilize traditional Jewish families and traditional gender roles and violate the sanctity of the Jewish family. Here, tradition is wielded as a patriarchal club to maintain a status quo, often at the expense of women's fulfillment.

Is Jewish culture so fragile, so beleaguered by the forces of change unleashed by modernity that any effort to challenge the way things have always been done threatens to undermine the system entirely? Some Orthodox women share this fear and therefore are willing to put what they perceive as the needs of the community before their own desires. Others argue that involving women in fresh ways and changing our gender expectations, ensures Judaism's survival for future generations.

For Orthodox Jewish women, the tension between loyalty to their tradition and their community and the desire for greater involvement in new roles and responsibilities carries with it serious ethical questions. Orthodox women must reconcile their fundamental adherence and fidelity to the *halakhic* system, with its unequal impact on women's lives and its moral deficiencies. In particular, it's allowing for the creation of *agunot*, women who are literally

chained to husbands who refuse to grant them a Jewish divorce.

I look forward to a conference that addresses the issues with the same love and respect that Orthodox women have shown and continue to show for their tradition. As we move forward, let the limitations that Orthodox women choose be those that contain the spark of the divine and the seeds of holiness.

**Benjamin Samuels:** My role this morning is to introduce the topic and the speakers for this first session, "Is Jewish Orthodox Life Threatened by Changing Gender Roles?" I have been asked to honor our speakers by not reading their bios, which are printed in our booklets, but by establishing what we hope to talk about before they have the opportunity to share their thoughts, which is why we have all come together today.

For many of us, and I include myself in this, our panel – Blu Greenberg, Dr. Tamar Ross, Dr. Sylvia Barack Fishman -- presents us with three heroes of the Jewish community, who are committed to active involvement in community, who have made tremendous scholarly contributions to the ongoing dialogue and discussion of our religious Jewish civilization, and who are courageous in speaking their minds and their visions. It's really an honor to be introducing them, and I thank you for the privilege.

Beyond *halakhic* challenges, and creative theological re-envisioning, we must discuss, in practice, how Orthodoxy can assimilate the social changes demanded by the feminist critique. This speaks to our vision of society, whether we seek an androgynous society devoid of gender or a gendered society, and if gendered, how we negotiate moral equity, spiritual access, and differences and distinctiveness. On a much more local level, what are the vision and the human dynamics, whether natured or nurtured, of our communities? How do these affect our *shuls*,

schools, homes, and the other arenas of Jewish communal life?

Let's discuss our *shuls* for a moment. There is some literature, at least coming from the Christian world, describing what is termed the "feminization" of the church and its impact upon both women's and men's participation. Is there an equivalent Jewish phenomenon? As a communal rabbi, I can speak from personal experience here, at least as one small representation. At our shul in Newton, Massachusetts, we have a wonderful Jewish Modern Orthodox community that I would describe as progressive in some ways and quite traditional in other ways. We have an absolutely open policy for all officer positions. They can be held by either men or women, and we've been blessed with wonderful women shul presidents in the past. In our shul, we have lay-delivered *d'vrei Torah* (scholarly talks) on a regular basis presented by both men and women, as well as a diversity of *shiurim* (classes) also presented by both women and men, and all of our classes, by policy, are coeducational. I will share two examples of responses to this culture of inclusivity, which I uphold as a value and affirm as an ideal.

One, I would describe as our *hashkama minyan* (early morning prayer group) phenomenon. We have a wonderful, healthy *hashkama minyan* that has continued to grow. It is marked by a serious *davening*, little talking, and an intimate, friendly setting. Our *hashkama minyan*, which is truly a beautiful place to *daven*, recreates in our modern Orthodox shul the feeling of a European-style *shtibl* (small men's synagogue). Although some women enjoy *davening* at our *hashkama minyan*, its primary participants are men, and its spirit and culture invokes the traditional male world within a progressive, modern Orthodox *shul*. And the gendered spatial dynamics of both the *davening* space and the sit-down *kiddush* seating supports this. And in some ways, in my own opinion, I see this phenomenon as an internal response, a

coping mechanism with some of the progressive stances that we have taken on inclusion and activism for women within the *halakhah*.

I will give you another example of this. I mentioned before that all of our courses and classes are coeducational. Our *shul* will not hold a *shul*-sponsored adult education class that is not coeducational. However, some of our most progressive members, who absolutely affirm and uphold this principle, in their own homes hold *gemara chavurahs* (partnered study sessions), women's *Tanakh* classes, and gendered book reading groups that are intentionally not coeducational. While we don't want to undermine our communal ideal by having such events on community time, on community property, in our private lives we do it all the time. These inconsistencies demonstrate the difficult and dynamic negotiation of integrating the feminist critique in an Orthodox community.

This difficult negotiation also speaks to issues of our *shul*'s membership in the larger community, to be seen as part of the norm, so to speak, in the spectrum of Orthodox shuls, and also in the membership we attract. How do we maintain a diversity of members within our shul, inclusive of both more liberal and more traditional, and yet uphold progressive values? It's a balancing act. And it is a challenge.

Let's talk about education. It's not the topic, per se, of coeducation versus single-sex education. I think both are formative and very healthy experiences to have in one's educational environment, and both are necessary for socialization. But let's talk about the best educational strategy for creating learned, strong Orthodox Jewish women. Then, when we do create learned, strong Orthodox Jewish women, whatever the educational strategy—through coeducation, through single-sex education—how do the men and children, and I would even add, the women

of the community react and respond to those learned and strong women? Do we make a role for them? Here, again, I will speak to a local phenomenon. We have a wonderful modern Orthodox school that is absolutely committed to the principles of equal access and equal education. Rabbi Soloveichik zt"l (of blessed memory) set it up that way. But men and women do not teach all classes and topics equally. My purpose is not to critique this and not to advocate it. I'm just observing what the reality is. The question of educational and professional roles is also part of our community's assimilation of the feminist agenda.

And what about in our homes? Is it important to have a sense of *paterfamilias* and *materfamilias*? Is Judaism irredeemably patriarchal, or do we aim to transform that totally? And, if so, what about rituals, which are so close to home; how do they support these cultural and social structures? How do we sit at our tables? Who serves? Who cooks? Who makes *kiddush* or *hamotzi*? Who lights candles?

What are the real and imagined threats to Orthodox life currently being attributed to Jewish education and the Orthodox feminist agenda? These are questions for men, and they are questions for women: What is the short view, given the gender dynamics of contemporary Orthodox religious culture? How do we navigate these challenges? And what is the long view—to what do we aspire? These and similar issues are the beginning of our conversation. and we have three wonderful speakers to address them.

**Tamar Ross:** I could just agree with everything that has been said and sit down, and I'm half tempted to do so, but I'll tell you that in preparing for this panel, we panelists were also given three specific questions to answer. I'll list them, and perhaps that will add to the discussion.

The first question was, when the boys club admits the girls, do the boys drop out? And,

as an addendum to that question, how are men and children reacting to strong women? The second question was, what do you think are the real and phony threats to Orthodox life, which are currently being attributed to women? The third question was, what is the relationship between women who call themselves feminists and those who don't? I decided to answer these questions working backwards. So, I will begin with the last question, what is the relationship between women who call themselves feminists and those who don't?

Women who call themselves feminists view those who don't as one of two sorts. Either they are the naive dupes of patriarchy who have been so successfully brainwashed and whipped into a false consciousness by their male oppressors that they don't know any better, or they are ungrateful beneficiaries of the hard work that has been done before them by the generations of their feminist mothers and are refusing to pay homage to the ideology that led them to their present liberated state.

Women who don't call themselves feminists, on the other hand, would phrase the reasons for their disassociation from the f-word (feminism) differently. A very rare minority may genuinely take issue with all aspects of feminism, however conceived, believing that women are innately subsidiary to men and should live out their lives in a hierarchical framework, achieving their interests vicariously by attending to those of their husbands and sons. Much more likely, however, is that if pressed to the wall, most women today who hesitate to call themselves feminists would agree to many of the major tenets of the movement when broadly defined. Although they may oppose egalitarianism all across the board (because they would say that equal does not mean same), or allegations of deliberate and systemic oppression of women and the need for a total structural transformation of tradition, they certainly would have no objection to

advancing women's opportunities in general and in the religious sphere in particular. If they hesitate to cast their lot completely with the feminist cause, it often has to do with the emotional and spiritual costs of single-minded feminist investment.

Tradition-bashing is a lonely and soul-destroying activity, estranging one from one's roots and natural social context. It's not very comfortable to stand at a distance and constantly view one's tradition through the lens of an outsider.

Another factor to be considered is that many of the benefits of tradition, even some that have originated in false and stereotypical assumptions regarding the nature of women and women's spirituality, have been genuinely internalized by the non-feminists. *Halakhic* definitions of modesty are for many not just an excuse for keeping women from the centers of power or denying them their rights to ownership of public space. They breed virtues that are truly cherished, and many women feel that such aesthetic and spiritual benefits may not endure in quite the same way if forced to undergo a radical feminist transformation. The image of women that feminism appears to encourage is, by comparison, quite simply unattractive in the eyes of such women, especially when accompanied by the bitterness and stridence that are a natural hazard of all reformers. It also becomes so monotonous—always viewing everything through gendered spectacles as if there were no common humanity left to us all.

A third factor lies in the spiritual temperament implied by respect for authority in general. Although some women would reject out of hand the demand that they acquiesce to a given ruling simply because someone with a formal title, whether male or female, so decrees, others subscribe to a view of the ideal religious personality as one who disciplines herself to obey authoritative decrees even when they do not concur with what she regards as her true

spiritual interests or deeply felt moral intuitions. Whatever the merits of a feminist religious understanding, how it can be reconciled with traditional religious notions of *kabbalat ol makhut shamayim* (accepting the yoke of heaven) and the concept of a transcendent God is a serious question.

Intertwined with these considerations is a motive which is more tactical. Many Orthodox women intuit what every experienced legislator accepts as a given: in order for a legal initiative to succeed, one must be not only right, one must also be *klug* (or clever). There are definite advantages to be gained in keeping a low profile in terms of feminist militancy. Some of the most important breakthroughs in paving the way for women's active participation in the *halakhic* process have been accomplished simply by virtue of a rhetoric which refuses to speak of the *halakha* as a wounded system in need of repair. When revolutionary visions are not presented as a feminist and anti-establishment enterprise, but rather suggested in a spirit of cooperation and compliance with the *halakhic* establishment, such proposals often pass with much less opposition than had they assumed another face. In this opposition to feminism, diplomacy and sincerity of attitude are mingled.

The maintenance of such a nonconfrontational facade is sometimes derided by the feminists as Pollyannish self-delusion. Women who are more consciously feminist feel that this mode of response provides a dangerous smokescreen, masking the more difficult problems and lulling women into a state of denial or passive acquiescence. Throwing bones to women by allowing them to appear in court as representatives of women chained to recalcitrant husbands doesn't resolve the deeper issues of women's status in Jewish marriage law, they will say. Neither does it change the fact that under current circumstances the judges will always be males.

Giving two hundred women space for their own *beit midrash* (study hall) does not overcome the absurdity of their having to scrounge around for a *minyán* of ten men and stand segregated behind a *mekhitza* in their own study hall before being allowed to recite *selikhot* (penitential prayers). Relaxing some of the rigidities of the hierarchy does not yet remove the glass ceiling and its anomalies.

I don't think complete disparity between the two groups will last forever. The militancy of the feminists is already being dissipated somewhat in the joy of learning. On the other hand, the initial satisfaction of the younger women with learning, and their new sense of themselves as spiritual beings whose prayer and study is important, naturally leads them to positions of responsibility in other realms of community leadership and *halakhic* guidance. As a result, they are being thrust, whether they like it or not, into confrontation with the more practical problems of discrimination in worship and law. Extended study also forces them into grappling with more problematic sources from which they were sheltered in the past by rosy digests. Such experience does not allow them to maintain the customary divorce between the grammar and technicalities of the text and their emotional or ideological substance. There are indications, even in the case of the non-feminist *batei midrash* (study halls), that such a merging of interests between non-feminists and feminists is already happening, and I don't have any doubt that this will continue.

This leads me to the second question, which was, what do you think are the real and phony threats to Orthodox life which are currently being attributed to feminist women?

Now, perhaps because I am a philosopher or because of some talmudic *pilpul* in my genes, I found it difficult to answer this question, because it can be taken in various ways. A threat attributed to feminist women may be phony either because it's actually nonexistent, or

because the negative connotation of the term “threat” has no basis, or because it is not really the feminists who are responsible. The first phony threat that I came up with answers mostly to the last consideration, and that is the threat of weakening the traditional Jewish family.

A couple of years ago I participated in an Israeli forum that was meant to explore the notion of the Jewish family in today's emerging social reality. The forum consisted of various people engaged in women's issues, rabbinic figures, and educators. Some of the educators and representatives of women's issues spoke of shifts that were taking place in today's world, even on the Jewish and Israeli scene—homosexual unions, single mothers, single fathers, the great decline of Israeli couples interested in going through the usual ceremony of *kiddushin* (marriage), couples in which the fathers nurtured and the mothers were the chief breadwinners, etc., etc.

The rabbis, on the other hand, generally represented Orthodox tradition, and they expressed concern over social forces that were threatening to undermine the status quo and dissolve the notion of the Jewish family as it had been known for centuries. But there was one rabbi there who served to break up this usual alignment. This rabbi was an unusual phenomenon, serving in the Reform movement in Israel even though he was not of Anglo-American stock but rather was born and bred Moroccan. And when he was asked to speak up his comment was: “I don't know what all this talk is of the typical Jewish family. One of the vivid childhood memories I have is of the visits I would make with my father to the home of his sister, who was my aunt. This aunt happened to be the second wife of an old Moroccan rabbi who had died early on in the marriage, and she was left holding the bag with his former aging wife. Whenever we would come to visit my aunt would lift up her hands to heaven and complain, “*Ribono shel olam*

(God of the world), couldn't you have left my husband with me for a few more years and taken away this old hag instead?" His point, of course, was that there is no such thing as a typical Jewish family, and that the polygamous unions of the *Torah* bear little relationship to the notions of family as we entertain it today.

Just about the only thing that can be generalized about the traditional Jewish family is its importance, standing as it does at the heart of the traditional Jewish way of life, and the existence of gender distinctions that generally relegate formal authority and ritual responsibility to the men. Other than this, it would be difficult to lay down hard lines regarding the specific form that the Jewish family should take. And although it is true that even these two bottom lines are being broken down today, I don't believe that it is correct to hand feminism the responsibility for this shift. This is a misplaced and exaggerated notion of feminist power. The breakdown of family and gender roles has much more to do with a variety of complicated factors: the rise of individualism and the western ideal of autonomy and self-fulfillment, the industrial revolution and displacement of labor from the home, the economic need for two-earner families, technological advances and medical breakthroughs that enable separation between reproduction and marriage, etc. All of these can be viewed more accurately as the *causes* of feminism rather than its effects.

A second phony threat attributed to feminist women is the importing of foreign notions into tradition. I believe this accusation is phony not because it's not true or because feminism is not involved in it, but because it is not necessarily a negative or even an avoidable phenomenon. Almost all of the fluctuations that have taken place in Jewish gender conceptions far before the advent of feminism reflect the constantly evolving impact of political, social, and economic

forces in the surrounding culture and their influence upon our understanding of *Torah*. Accusing Orthodox women who are affected by the current modern consciousness of importing into Judaism outside values that have no basis in tradition is as misplaced as it would be to accuse the *Torat Moshe* of importing patriarchy into tradition. Where these values started is irrelevant. What is relevant is how we incorporate these in a Jewish manner once they have affected and become an inextricable part of the everyday lives of the *halakhically* committed.

As for real threats to Orthodox life that are currently being attributed to women that I would mention —these are real in the sense that they do exist and are being advanced by feminism. They also pose an element of danger to the Orthodox way of life as we have known it for centuries, although whether this is good or bad is a matter for discussion. The first danger I would like to address is undermining the authority of the official *halakhic* establishment and the exclusive preserve of men in the sphere of ritual and religious leadership.

Feminist women faced with lack of initiative on the part of the religious establishment in addressing their needs are turning less and less to rabbinic authority for true guidance. They are initiating prenuptial agreements; they are inventing women's forms of ritual; they are establishing *baytei midrash* and their own methods of interpretation.

Women who have been affected by the feminist revolution are also creeping, inch-by-inch, into the bastions of *halakhic* authority as *yoatsot halakha*, rabbinic pleaders, as the authors of articles examining *halakhic* issues of particular concern to them, as teachers of *Torah she b'al peh* (oral law), and as rabbinic leaders in function if not in name. And they are also attempting to erode the centuries-old tradition of women as spectators in public ritual, first by developing their own *tefillah* groups and now by more public and active participation in mixed *minyanim*.

The resistance to this phenomenon is generally phrased in *halakhic* terms. But over the years, women's greater facility with the sources has helped them appreciate that there are often precedents that could support several contradictory directions, and that in such cases decidedly subjective and discretionary factors also come into play. A striking example of this is a position that has been expressed by Rav Yoel Bin-Nun, the *rosh yeshiva* (headmaster) of *Yishivat Kibbutz Ha Dati* (religious kibbutz movement) in Israel. Bin-Nun has come out with unusually liberal views regarding the right and even the obligation of most contemporary women to assume a *mitzvah* obligation that is equal to that of men, since the women of today compose a new *halakhic* category of independent women (*benot horin*), who are no longer subject to the authority of their fathers or husbands. This leads him to rule that if a group of modern *benot horin* consistently take on the obligation of prayer, this practice allows them to form a proper *minyan* for themselves and recite all the blessings that generally require a male quorum (*devarim she-bikedushah*). Yet despite this unconventional stand, Bin-Nun explicitly disassociates himself from any application of his theory to mixed-sex prayer groups after the fashion of *Shira Hadasha*.

As Bin-Nun puts it, the need for constraint in mixed-sex prayer stems from considerations of modesty, which he believes should be applied more stringently in the synagogue than in ordinary life. Such constraint constitutes sufficient basis, in his eyes, for opposing even a less radical response to the wish for egalitarian inclusion of women in mixed-sex settings that has already been adopted by a few Orthodox campus communities of a more egalitarian bent, who wait for the presence of ten women in addition to the required quorum of ten men before starting the service.

Women who work and study alongside men have reason to be suspicious of this argument. Can the concern for modesty really be the cause for objection to including women in a *minyan* or even holding up services after ten men have been counted? Although Bin-Nun acknowledges that it is this constraint, rather than more theoretical issues of theology and historicism, that is the great divide between the Orthodox and Conservative movements in today's world and claims to regret the factionalism that it creates, I believe that he is putting the cart before the horse. It is precisely the need to preserve symbolic boundaries between ourselves and other denominations that fuels conservative resistance to greater inclusion of women in public ritual and in positions of authority. And although I believe that Ha-Rav Bin-Nun hasn't identified his motives accurately, it is worth taking a hard look at what is really at stake.

Resistance to inclusion of women in these areas is not always a power issue. Certainly this is not the case for Rav Bin-Nun, who has also publicly advocated that men give up telling learned women what to do in matters of religious discretion. "Women of today," he has said, "are clever enough and pious enough to decide for themselves, and we don't have to tell them what to do." But symbolic boundaries are important for theological reasons; the notion that we have certain limits placed upon our behavior is a metaphoric way of expressing the idea that we are not the total masters of our destiny, and that there is another dimension besides the everyday pragmatic one that influences our behavior.

Even more importantly, in the case that Bin-Nun is discussing, such boundaries are important for social reasons, delineating a sense of the community in whose form of life we choose to place our trust and allegiance. A *tefillah* at which women are as prominent as men doesn't look or feel like that of Bin-Nun's grandfather or like that of other Orthodox Jews. It

may be equitable, it may be aesthetic, but it is not traditional *tefillah*. It is another experience.

This raises the question of to what extent should women (and men) be called upon to sacrifice their interests for the sake of maintaining symbolic boundaries. It also leads me back to the first question regarding the boys who drop out of the men's club when the women join. I believe that considerations of male frailty as a blanket argument for clipping women's wings is problematic, and—in contrast to the symbolic boundaries consideration—I don't think these can be used as justification for banning valuable opportunities for developing women's spiritual life and interests. It is true that to this day popular folktales are fond of depicting women voluntarily choosing to subscribe to what has been termed “mythical male dominance,” playing a game of deference in order to compensate their menfolk for ways in which the balance of power works in women's favor. Perhaps there is genuine wisdom in the Jewish relegation of titular dominance to the male understanding that behind the scenes the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world. Strong women aren't the invention of feminism. They always existed and perhaps functioned even more effectively in certain contexts under the guise of weakness. But if a fresh demand now arises out of women's sense of oppression, this sense will not be crushed by speculative anthropological theories and deliberate social engineering.

I can also understand men who would object to essentialist allegations of their weakness for the same reasons that women object to allegations of their incapacity to study Talmud. In both cases, these insufficiencies are a result rather than the cause of the social institutions in which they are perpetuated. The very appearance of feminism may signal that social forces now demand new patterns of relationship between men and women, and men as well as women have to be educated in light of these new visions.

On the other hand, if denominational divisions are a real value (and this is an issue that I think we have to seriously discuss and debate), then rethinking some symbolic male/female divisions of the past may be a necessary contribution of women to this endeavor. This means that the real threats of feminism to Orthodoxy mandate that we choose our battles selectively, making intelligent distinctions between gender traditions that, via a certain measure of recasting, can still be allowed to pass gracefully in the current context, or even encouraged as part of our pride in being women, and those whose implications must be fought tooth and nail, because they are now known to be unequivocally bad.

Only by a process of negotiation that takes the form of various tradeoffs, compromises, and unexpected instances of compliance, can we achieve the sort of variety and unity that is characteristic of true communal stability.

**Blu Greenberg:** If Tamar said she felt like she could sit down after everything that was said, *al akhat kama vekama*, I am following Tamar.

I want to take a moment to express appreciation for all those who put this conference together, but especially to Sylvia Barack Fishman. It's been a marvel to observe Sylvia guide this conference. She totally undoes the notion that you need a full year in advance and a dozen sit-down meetings to come up with a good program and speakers. She took every teleconference discussion and translated it into a sophisticated charge for the next step. Now you might think she does this while sitting in her office with regular hours and with a staff, but I traveled to Israel with Sylvia in November on the Grinspoon Foundation mission. When she boarded the plane, she did not have in her computer the outlines of the sessions that were discussed by the committee over the phone earlier that morning, but by the time we landed, she did. One evening,

after a very long and tiring day of visiting sites and walking and talking, Sylvia informally discussed over dinner a particular conference session, and by the next morning she had already emailed a new formulation to everyone on the committee for feedback. So, know that I speak for other members of the planning committee when I say that the experience was pleasant—perhaps user-friendly is the best way to describe what it's like working with Sylvia. Brandeis is lucky to have her, Hadassah is lucky, and JOFA is lucky.

Tamar iterated the four questions, and I'll begin in order, following the rules, with number one. Actually, I am going to respond to question number one—will the boys flee?—with four anecdotes and then parse them.

Some time during the 1970s I spent *Shabbat* at a Conservative synagogue in Chicago, which is lead by Rabbi Samuel Dresner—of blessed memory—one of the leading thinkers and writers of the Conservative movement. On Sunday morning I was at the men's club breakfast and a man asked the same question: won't the men flee when the women take over the *shul*? I was then more brash and unthinking than I am now, and not realizing that he was asking a profound social and theological question I curtly responded, "If you think [of] the *shul* as an old boys' club, you're on the wrong track. You will have to do your male bonding in the bowling alley or on the golf course. The *shul* is the place of worship for all Jews."

Anecdote two: I was walking across Jerusalem with a Reform rabbi and we had just shared a panel discussion. I had mentioned during the course of that panel that I had not completely sorted out the matter of obligation of women to prayer, an issue that the Conservative movement was grappling with and had resolved only for their female rabbis. Susan Lemly made an interesting observation. She said, "If you want a job done, then ask a particular person to do

it.” She felt, even as a feminist, and even as one who felt that *halakha* was not always binding in every case or, as the Conservative motto was, had a vote but not a veto, that there was some higher meaning to the distinctive roles for men and women in *halakhic* Judaism and in prayer.

Anecdote three: Last *Shabbat* in Riverdale I was at the partnership *minyan* called *Shakhar*, which is constructed along the lines of *Shira Hadasha* and *Darkhei No'am*. I counted the number wearing *talitot* (prayer shawls) and the number who weren't and found that the majority of women there were wearing a *talit*, and I was among the minority. I think the *talit* is beautiful, also *tefillin*, our brilliant ritual to get the first attention and steadiness of young boys as they morph into men, yet I still think of *talit* as male and *tefillin* even more so. So I'm not personally at a point where I feel comfortable or desirous of wearing either, although I have no negative feelings about other women wearing them, and even though I have two *talitot* in my possession, one that was sent to me by a Conservative rabbi with a simple note saying “For you, for whenever.” But I had a moment of anxiety last *Shabbat* morning at *tefillah* wondering how soon the day will come when I will be the only one in such a setting not wearing a *talit* and the community of men and women will all look alike except for one outsider, Blu sitting in the back. Or, will the pressure be upon me to don a *talit*, and I'll feel perfectly at home and enveloped in its embrace, pulled forward one more time.

Anecdote four: Eight-and-a-half years ago my beloved father died. I'm one of three daughters, and I had never discussed with him the idea of saying *kaddish* for him. Though I wrote about this academically or intellectually, I didn't think about it for myself, and after he died I had not intended to recite *kaddish*, but I did during *whivah* (week of mourning), and then I did during *shloshim* (the first month of mourning), and then somehow, without ever making the

commitment, I did for the whole year. It was an incredible experience for me, one that I wasn't prepared for—the sense of healing in the presence of a nurturing community. I rarely use the words “oppressed” or “deprived,” particularly in relation to women and prayer, but I had this feeling many times throughout the year, as I experienced the beauty of *kaddish* that women, for centuries, for generations, for thousands of years, were deprived of.

So, will the men flee? Will the boys flee?

Over the years reading in ad hoc fashion reports of rabbinic proceedings, conferences in the liberal denominations, and hearing rabbis increasingly complain about the problem of feminization of their synagogues, or hearing them describe that more women show up in the morning *minyan* to say *kaddish* than men, or knowing of some *shuls* where the rabbi is a woman, the assistant rabbi is a woman, and the *hazzan* (cantor) is also a woman, and the little boys wonder whether it is possible for them, too, to become rabbis, I understand that this can pose a problem, even if only a temporary one. So I think it is a question that we ought to be asking, not necessarily to call a halt to women's entry or new access or hold them back, but simply to find that fine line in which both men and women alike will feel responsible, welcome, and fulfilled in the roles assigned to them. And it may require that the community build in modifications, so that men do not flee or feel isolated. We should not do unto others what was done to us. For some men, women's liberation is still traumatic. They feel the familiar rug has been pulled out from under them, and so we ought to be mindful of their sensibilities. And I'm not talking about the issue of gender-bonding.

The truth is that the Orthodox have it much easier on this issue, because of *khiyuv*, the concept of obligation. The numbers of Orthodox women who attend Friday night services and

*Shabbat*-morning services is much greater than it used to be, and even in the morning *minyans* Orthodox men are not abandoning their obligations. They are there because it's their legacy and trust left to them, and fleeing the *beit midrash* or the *beit kineset* is not a real and present danger, it's simply not an option.

At the last JOFA conference, we offered three types of *minyanim*, three types of services: one was women's *tefillah*, which still doesn't take the name *minyan*, Yoel Bin-Nun notwithstanding; men's *minyan*; and the partnership *minyan*. I had intended to *daven* in the partnership *minyan*, but when I saw there were already two hundred people in the room, which was approximately the number that showed up for *davening* at our previous conferences with a larger registration rate, I had an inkling that this crowd spelled disaster for the women's *tefillah*, so I decided to go and park my body there. In both the women's *tefillah* and the men's *minyan*, there were approximately fifteen *daveners* in each, and although those who come to JOFA conferences are preselected, still the number of men and women in the partnership *minyan* was an indication to me where the community choices might take us, and men are not leaving.

I see in the Riverdale Jewish Center and Hebrew Institute of Riverdale that couples sequence their *Shabbat*-morning *tefillah*. Oftentimes, the husband/father goes to the very, very early *hashkama minyan*. There is early *hashkama* and *hashkama*, which is over by 9:00. Then he goes home to take care of the children, and the wife/mother comes for the next *minyan*.

But the issue is not that simple, and the real question embedded in it is whether we are moving towards a model of identical and interchangeable roles, as many Orthodox feminists I believe are now doing, and which is how feminism has been defined in the world at large. I am not sure whether in the long run this may be the best choice, either for Judaism or for the world. I

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am still inclined to believe, on some level, that there are definitions to male and female beyond biology, and though these definitions do shrink in my reality from year to year, as the facts on the ground change and the conditioning along with it, still I subscribe to the theory of different and equal, that it's possible to have different ritual roles and still be equal. On the one hand, the rabbis created such large role distinctions between men and women that these easily spilled over into hierarchy and, of course, are no longer satisfactory. On the other hand, the rabbis were also great watchers of human nature, which is how they got to the exquisite laws of *shivah*, or mourning. Perhaps it was centuries of people-watching, and not misogyny that brought them to differentiate men's and women's roles. I would say that even if *halakha* were to posit no barriers to men and women having identical roles—which is not something on the horizon—something in my gut still tells me that a model of distinctive and equal in certain areas may, in the long run, better suit and serve human nature. And yet, and yet—the experience of saying *kaddish* or *tefillat bitsipur* at an early morning *minyan* makes me pause and wonder. I know for centuries, just as boys were taking on *talit* and *tefillin* and taking prayer more seriously, girls' eyes began to glaze over. Moreover, it's possibly more myth than truth, but I call it editorializing *psak*, that women themselves opted out of *tefillah*. I'm not so sure whether that is true. I've always said that women are just as spiritually connected to God, without the same, equal, formal prayer, but now I'm not so sure about that. And maybe my thesis of distinctive and equal is very much based on conditioning more than anything else.

And, finally, I want to say that I'm aware that my whole thesis is vulnerable. If I take my arguments to their logical and theological conclusions or look for consistency, then women would suffer from being differentiated in the area of learning, and I don't believe that there

should be any difference between men and women in the area of learning. Women should have access to all texts, teachers, incentives, institutions, and credentials of learning, including ordination. I think we would have long ago eliminated the potential for *iggun* had we added the critical mass of women as rabbis and *dayanim* to the mix.

So I've answered question one in the proper Jewish way, which is raising five more questions.

The second question, of strong women, I'm going to skip in the interest of time. We've always had strong women, and even the threat of mothers [who tell] their daughters not to get too smart, you don't hear that anymore.

The real and phony threats. The phony threat I think is erosion to the Jewish family. I have to plead guilty to participating in that threat at one point in my life. In my very first talk on the subject in 1973 and in the first articles that I wrote for *Hadassah Magazine*, I did say that feminism was not good for the Jewish family, and that we had to position ourselves on this issue in opposition to feminism. There are several reasons why I made that comment, and I think some of those reasons at that time were valid, but I think the pendulum has swung back entirely. Certainly there is much support from feminism for family roles. I think that the continuing accusation that feminism is destroying the Jewish family, which is delivered at every *agudah* conference for the last decade to considerable applause, is false and, at the very least a straw woman. I believe the opposite is true, that you cannot have a good marriage and family life today, a long-term, safe haven in marriage, without the core of equality in the relationship.

What are the real threats to Orthodoxy? One is the widening gap between modern Orthodoxy and the right wing—and I want to applaud all that Tamar has said about this.

Certainly the right wing has felt the impact of feminism and has made some remarkable steps, even though the words “feminism” and “equality” are never, ever used. But many of the areas of feminism that we see in modern Orthodoxy, they see as a total breakdown of tradition, among them, the new and inclusive forms of prayer, women teaching Talmud, the murmuring of women about ordination. Until now, we could *daven* in each others' *shuls*, but when more of the new values for women are integrated into the mainstream of Orthodoxy, that crossover, the feeling of being at home in an Orthodox shul anywhere on the spectrum, will be less likely. In some areas, I hope the gap will widen, for example, *kol islah* (prohibitions on women's roles), which I believe should be re-examined and re-interpreted within Orthodoxy, which has currently gone over to the dark side on this issue.

Another real challenge is not exactly knowing where the end is. Many a time I have been asked this question: What do you really want, and what are the final parameters? I have no clearcut vision of the details, other than that there will be an absolute standard of equality in marriage and divorce, which means totally eliminating the potential for creating *agunot*; that women have equal access to power and authority and decision-making; and that there is a standard of cognitive equality in both ritual access and spirituality, which means that men and women will feel fully equals in the eyes of man, woman, and God.

As to the details, they'll be worked out in a partnership between community and *halakhic* leadership. I'm going to not take the last question, but I'll just finish here: I think it's fair to say that most modern Orthodox rabbis are also struggling with future steps, and part of their reluctance to move on certain issues is not knowing where the next step will lead, or the one after that. I do believe that in the eyes of many *halakhic* [interpreters], the issue is not so much

this particular detail newly interpreted, or that new right accorded to women, but rather whether the whole structure of differentiation of roles will gradually go down the tube. Some label this the slippery-slope argument, but that always has a negative connotation, and I don't want to ascribe negativism. I think they feel caution and fear, but not necessarily ill will. I think these are fair questions to raise and to hear being raised.

The last challenge, I would say, is what happens to the power of the commanding voice? In calling for re-interpretation, *halakhic* re-interpretation, we're basically calling for human intervention. The balance between human intervention and the voice from Sinai is one of the most brilliant contributions of the rabbis. As we are in this process of upheaval, as it were, in the status quo, it behooves us to consider how to maintain this balance. I've been faulted many times for my statements about rabbinic will and *halakhic* way, and I certainly still totally affirm this as a historical truth, but I'm not so ready to dismiss the attack on me as misogynist, but rather as an expression of a fear of denuding *halakha* of its divinity and disconnecting the process from its sacred sources. So interpretation of the sources, *halakhic* precedent, ancient minority views, understanding the ethical nature of feminism as neatly fitting into classic Jewish definitions of justice and ethics, being mindful of language, of authority and chain of tradition—these are but a few of the ways we could protect the awe, even as we continue with our very human tinkering. I think there are many examples, and perhaps this is exactly what the rabbis did, but I think I'm already in enough hot water so as not to come up with any pithy statements about rabbinic processes.

**Sylvia Barack Fishman:** I am happy to be speaking with women who bravely defined the new frontier, because that gives me permission to be somewhat “retro” in my comments this morning.

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One of the things that I really wanted from this conversation was to think about the tensions that women feel and the reasons for the tensions. I'm going to approach these things sociologically rather than from the standpoint of *halakha*. One of the axioms of feminist sociological analysis is that there is a profound difference between biological sexual differences and the gender roles that are constructed by particular societies. These gender roles may be, in some cases, based on biological differences, but a lot of the specifics of gender role construction have nothing whatsoever to do with biology, although they come to telegraph maleness or femaleness in the societies where they become the standard. Orthodox Judaism may be one of the best examples of the lack of relationship between gender role construction and biological differences, and that's especially true when we talk about male gender role construction. Think about how maleness has been defined within Orthodox Judaism: a man is someone who prays three times a day, at specific times, preferably with a group of at least nine other men. There's no biological basis for that being something that defines a man. A man is somebody who tries to participate in the study of sacred texts, preferably every day, but at least as often as possible. If we look at the things that define maleness within traditional Jewish life and within Orthodoxy today, we see that this is a great example of a pure gender role construction rather than something that is tied to biological differences. And within Orthodoxy, as within many societies, femaleness is defined partially as the lack of maleness, which translates to: a woman is someone who is not required to pray three times a day at specific times, and it doesn't matter whether or not she is praying with a group, because she does not contribute to the group's groupiness.

If we look at the rabbinic rationale for the woman not being required to do many of the time-bound rituals, we do see a tie-in to biological differences, because the reason that's given

for women not to be required to do these things is that any person who is engaged in doing one *mitzvah* is free of another *mitzvah*. Since the assumption was that women would be involved in nursing or caring for children, therefore they were not obligated in the same way as men. It's interesting that when we look at traditional gender role construction in Jewish societies, maleness was not biologically connected in any obvious way, but femaleness actually was.

The particular non-biological male gender role construction of Judaism had two positive effects in historical Jewish societies. First, since all men, even the most ordinary, poorly educated men, had daily religious obligations, men saw themselves as the carriers and transmitters of religion. This is in opposition to many western societies, where women are seen as the religious ones, religion is seen as a woman's thing, women are spiritual, and men are people whose maleness is defined by hunting or fishing or earning money or other non-religious occupations.

I believe, and I'm certainly not the first person to express this opinion, that these daily religious obligations served to domesticate Jewish men. This is a positive. I'm not saying this as a negative expression. From Maimonides through Norman Mailer and Philip Roth, there has been a recognition that the myriad of Jewish ritual laws and prohibitions and the placing of religiosity on men served to tone down male aggressive tendencies. That's why Philip Roth's Alexander Portnoy campaigned, as well as complained, "Let's put the *id* back into *Yid*." This domestication of Jewish men led to what I see as the second effect of Jewish gender role construction, which is the creation of largely stable homes in largely stable societies.

Now I'm saying "largely," because one of the things we've come to recognize is there were always dysfunctional Jewish families, there was always substance abuse in Jewish families,

there was spousal abuse, so I'm not positing a rosy picture of uniformly, stereotypically happy families. But, what I am saying—and I think this is historically accurate—is that despite enormous and often horrific geographic disruption and other kinds of disruption, Jewish families tended to replicate generation after generation and to create largely stable societies. It is true that in these stable societies there wasn't a lot of room for people who didn't fit in. There wasn't a comfortable niche for single people or other people who didn't fit in, but the stability of society really was aided by these very specific Jewish gender role definitions.

Many societies, and Jewish societies also, when they were creating gender role definitions, believed that too much learning was not good for women. It wasn't just that learning was a positive for Jewish men. Many societies besides Jewish society—Victorian England, for example—believed that women who studied too much would be barren. The idea, which was articulated by so-called medical experts in Victorian England, was that if women were too intellectual, if they read too much or thought too much, all the blood would flow up to their brains, and there would be nothing left in the uterus to enable them to conceive and gestate children. Women who were too intellectual, articulate, and aggressive were called bluestockings and were seen as deficient in feminine attributes. Both first-wave and second-wave feminism had, as one of their goals, to overcome these notions about an antipathy between femaleness and intellectualism. We see that even though gender role definitions may not actually have any scientific biological connections, often they are interpreted as though they had biological connections—thus this perceived antipathy between uterine fertility and mental fertility.

Orthodox women of my generation worked hard to start expanding the role of women within the boundaries of *halakha*. One of our discoveries was that *halakha* was actually much

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more expansive in terms of the options that were possible to create for women. With the help of sympathetic rabbis, Orthodox feminists of my generation pushed and pushed to expand the roles, to change gender role definition, so that Orthodox gender role definition for women included a lot of activities such as women's learning and public participation in certain contexts, women's *tefillah* groups, and later partnership congregations. We thought our daughters would be grateful. However, one of the startling things that I discovered in a study that I did a few years ago on feminism in Orthodox Jewish life is that many in the younger generation of Orthodox women retreated from many of the goals of their mothers. One of our questions is, will the boys leave, but here I'm saying the girls sometimes leave too. It's interesting to think about why young women—not universally, but a large proportion—retreated from the goal of expanding the roles of women in public worship and other public settings and focused exclusively on extensive learning. The way some people phrased it was that extensive learning, learning of Talmud for women, has been made kosher, but for some reason women's participation in worship services and other kinds of public Judaism still has a negative connotation in terms of gender role construction. It doesn't seem quite kosher, although most people in the Orthodox world aren't quite ready to call it *treyf*. This is something that Belda Lindenbaum and I have talked about—that for younger women there is a very realistic anxiety about marriageability, and if the society defines gender role in such a way that a girl is suspect if she is involved in perceived feminist activities, or sometimes even if her mother is involved in perceived feminist activities, this interferes with her attractiveness. If you want to talk about the way a society constructs gender, that's a great example, that somehow she is less femalely appealing because of these feminist activities, either her own or her mother's. What we are really describing here is a psychosocial

factor.

Another issue when we look at gender role construction is the impact of feminization, and I think this is undeniable. It's just out there. Feminization is when a particular environment has so many women that men don't think of it as a place that enhances their maleness, and it becomes less desirable to them. We see many professions that have become feminized. Probably one of the best examples is being a secretary. If you look at late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20th century workplaces, it was an accomplishment to become a secretary, to have the secretarial role. It wasn't always called secretary, sometimes it was called clerk, and men competed for those positions. As women began to move into those particular positions, they became much less attractive for men, and soon there was no interest of men to fulfill those roles. If we look especially at the Protestant movement in the United States, we see congregations that are primarily female, and if you look at Conservative and Reform congregations on a typical *Shabbat* morning when there is no bar or bat mitzvah, you will see congregations that are primarily female.

It's of course a matter of interpretation how you react to the fact that there are no men there. I love a story once told by Shula Reinharz. She was in a synagogue that had a lot of women in it and just a handful of men, and a man walked in and said, "Where are all the Jews?" That anecdote really illustrates the fact that women are often not perceived as Jews, even in non-Orthodox settings. We need not be so frightened of the flight of men being replaced by women. We need to be celebratory of the fact that there are women there. But after we finish celebrating I think we need to be concerned that there aren't men there. I don't think it's a bogus issue. It's a real issue. I'm not here to psychoanalyze maleness, but for whatever reason feminization is a real

thing, people didn't just make it up when they started to talk about threats to traditional Orthodox life. It has happened in other religions, it has happened in other wings of Judaism, and being concerned about it happening is not misplaced anxiety—although that doesn't mean that we need to base our decisions on that particular anxiety.

Another issue that I would like to bring to the table is that part of the traditional gender role definition was the concept of *sheh hazman grama* (time is relevant), certain behaviors that women were exempt from because they were time-dependent. This goes back to the idea that women would have other tasks, which were also commanded tasks, such as taking care of children, which would make it difficult for them to be obligated. And I think we need to understand the stringency of obligation. "Obligated" in Orthodoxy means obligated. You *have* to do it, not "you can do it if you like it," or "you do it if it's convenient." You have to do it. So the rabbinic concept was, how can you obligate a person to do one thing, when they are also going to be forced to do another thing? It's not fair; you're putting them into a position where they will certainly neglect one obligation.

I used to think this was a phony thing until I was caught one day. Like Blu, I found my year of saying *kaddish* extremely moving, profoundly moving and healing, in ways I never expected. But one day when I was saying *kaddish*, my husband also had a *yahrzeit* for one of his parents. I was saying *kaddish* for my mother, and my father was quite ill. He was in the house, and he had, supposedly, 24-hour-a-day healthcare coming to the house. Well, that particular morning, the healthcare person just didn't arrive. I had run to the synagogue early to get the early *kaddishes*, and I expected to see my husband arriving any time, because we thought that at any minute the healthcare person would come. Then it became obvious to me that something must

have happened. So in the middle of services I ran home so that my husband could get to the synagogue to do the *kaddishes* at the end of the *davening*. And this is just with eldercare.

Imagine if one were dealing with having young children in the home. How, logistically, could it be worked out if both men and women were equally obligated to be at worship services? How could childcare be worked out? We could have a *hashkama minyan*, an early morning *minyan*, every single morning. There could be a 5 o'clock *minyan*, there could be a 6 o'clock *minyan*—imagine how that would work. So I think that a lot of the issues are genuine, and that should be acknowledged.

I want to touch just briefly on the very common fear, shared by many societies, as I said, right up through the 19th century, that changing women's roles will decrease women's feminine attributes, including maternalism. Here is where I have something to say which is probably in the other direction than I have been going up until now. Looking at American life today, I would say that's already happened. There's been a shift in maternalism as a definition of femaleness, and that has had both positive and negative impacts. The negative impact, I think, is that young Jews, including young Orthodox Jews, do not have marriage on their radar screen until much later in their lives. One result is that there's not only delayed marriage, but also non-marriage. We have an epidemic of singleness in the Jewish community, unwanted singleness. Any person who wants to be single for their whole life, that is certainly their choice. But I think that there are many men, and even more women, including Orthodox women, who find themselves single not by choice, partially because of the different emphasis of our society, which leaves them at a certain age in a situation where there are very few options for them in terms of finding appropriate partners.

The other shift in maternalism I think is actually a very positive development. It's a wonderful model that has been developing for at least four decades, and that's the model of shared responsibility in the Orthodox household. It may even be the majority of young Orthodox families that work on the model of both husband and wife sharing responsibilities. In some cases, they are both also working outside the home, and that is a contributory factor, but even where they are not working outside the home, there is a sharing of childcare responsibilities. It's not just stuff that men do, it's also a development of maternalism among Jewish men. I see this as an enormously positive development. I'm purposely calling it maternalism and purposely not calling this family orientation or family concerns. I think that there is a kind of mothering going on by Jewish men, including Orthodox Jewish men, which is very, very positive. When I was a young mother, my friends and I sometimes used to snicker about the phrase "*k'vakhem av*," "like the mercy a father shows to his children." The reason we used to snicker about that phrase is we used to talk about male selective hearing loss versus the exquisite sensitivity that most mothers develop to any sound, no matter how tiny, during the night. I know that personally, it wrecked my powers of concentration for years and years. Now that is equally shared by fathers and mothers. I would say that Orthodox fathers have developed better hearing. I think of a comment of my mentor, Marshall Sklar. He said, "Every Jewish child should have a Jewish mother, even if it's a Jewish father." One of the great results of these blurred and expanded gender-role boundaries in the modern Orthodox world is that many Jewish children have two Jewish mothers, and one of them is male.

Another aspect which I think is tremendously positive is the explosion of Jewish feminist scholarship. Here I would show you Tamar Ross's new book as an example of the Brandeis

series on Jewish women, and there are other series as well. If you have a chance, you should go next door—not during the session, of course—to the book sale, and you will see that there has been an explosion of Jewish books. One of the results is that we now know that historically, Jewish women's roles were always more varied and more diverse than we sometimes imagined them to be. I especially point you in the direction of two books, one by Avram Grossman, the other one by Iris Parush, which look at these expanded roles.

I presented you with many aspects that I don't think are so positive about gender-role re-orientation, some that I think are very positive, and several that I think are at least something we should keep in mind and worry about. I want to finish up by drawing our attention to something we're going to have a session on later today, and that's the problem of the *agunah*. I think that the problem of the *agunah* is the canary in the mineshaft. The fact that we still have women trapped in that way with the approval and collaboration of rabbinic authority, tells us that no matter what the anxieties about changes in gender-role definition that I have outlined for you this morning, we have an existential need to work for change, because there are things happening which are profoundly immoral, and I would argue, profoundly anti-Jewish. Working for these changes ultimately will be a benefit to men and to women, and to Orthodox society, but I would simply urge us all to be cognizant of what might be lost in the transaction and to try to protect those things as well.

**Q:** I'm Karen Miller, from the JOFA board. I think this whole topic of gender roles is fascinating, and it's speaking very much to the heart—I'm able to be here away from my three small children because my husband is at home, taking over. Throughout all of what these women had to say, which was so powerful, one thing that I kept thinking about is a phenomenon that is

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happening in the wider world, which has been written about in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*, and in the *New York Times Magazine*: women who have been products of the feminist revolution, who have gone to Ivy League schools and law school and become partners in law firm and vice presidents in banks who suddenly choose to be stay-at-home moms. Tova Hartman said yesterday that we wouldn't tolerate our daughters graduating law school and not being allowed to be judges, which of course is true, but these women are actually choosing not to be judges. This whole phenomenon might speak a little bit to what Blu Greenberg was talking about in terms of possible original gender roles. Maybe there is something to that naturally. I was hoping that the two of you could speak to this. I obviously am very conflicted about it, as I do consider myself an Orthodox feminist and believe in equality, but perhaps what this phenomenon as a case study might be teaching us is that there needs to be some sense of "distinctive but equal" or an opportunity for choice to be able to do and redefine feminism.

**Q:** I'm a Brandeis senior and God-willing, a rabbinical student next year. Basically, one of the things you mentioned is the education of young women and that one of the factors that might hold them back is a fear of marriage and everything else. Do you think this is a problem of education, that these schools that people send their daughters to and they send their sons to are more right wing than the parents are, and are therefore teaching the children that women's role is in the home, not in the public forum, not in prayer, not in any of these other things?

**Shulamit Reinharz:** I'd like to answer the question about *khiyuv*, obligation. I think it was addressed primarily by Sylvia Fishman, but I'm sure Blu has something to say about it. Every human being has obligations that are in conflict with one another occasionally. It is not uniquely a female problem to have conflicts of obligation. Why is the conflict in obligation among

females considered a reason to lessen the obligations, but not among men, who also suffer from obligation conflict? And the second question is, the way I heard you translate the *halakhic* phrase about *khiyuv* is that they are less obligated. But when you don't have that conflict, can't you then take on the obligation?

**Q:** I have a comment. I have *layned* (read *Torah*) at Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox services. I was quite surprised at a women's modern Orthodox *minyan* when they went "Oh!" when they heard that I had *layned* at Reform and Conservative services. I wanted you to address our fears about that slipping-to-another-denomination idea.

I'm also a parent who has been sending her sons to a more Orthodox day school than I ever was exposed to. They're being exposed to very rigid ideas of women and men, but I'm still their radical mother, and I always want to teach them equality between men and women and boys and girls, and I hope I'm not confusing my sons.

**Blu Greenberg:** I'll start, and we'll go back and forth. In response to Karen Miller's comments, yes, it always surprises me when these articles appear in the *Times*, and people get so bent out of shape and there's a whole backlash to the *Times* reporting these phenomena. So first I want to say that whatever the *Times* reports today is the opposite of what they'll report next month. That's one factor. But I think women are actually making these choices, because I know many women personally who have made the same choices. I think it's actually quite a healthy thing. I think feminism is about choice, and everyone has 24/7 hours and X amount of energy, and some people love to be super-moms or superwomen, and some get worn out after a while. Some are challenged by it, and some are exhilarated by it, and some are frustrated by it, so it's very healthy that, depending on their financial circumstances and a whole host of factors, women can

make these choices for themselves and not necessarily all be put into one mold. That was the critique that I had in the early days of feminism, it understood women only in one mold, so that women who were working eighteen hours a day in their homes would answer the question, "What do you do?" by saying, "Nothing."

Secondly, going a little more deeply into this, as I look around and as I read—and I think the cutting edge of feminist literature deals with this too—I think women want to maintain the edge on nurturing. I don't think they want everything up for grabs in their relationships, in their marriages, and in their parenting roles—which is not to deny that we see beautiful sharing, but society isn't always constructed for fifty-fifty sharing. Sometimes one has to take more of a role in one area, like breadwinning, and one has to take more of a role in being the hands-on parent. As I look around, I think that although the number is increasing, there are, percentage-wise, very few men who are taking on the primary nurturing role, and being responsible for car pool in the middle of the day, and all the other things that go with raising children. And what is the reason for this? Conditioning is perhaps one, biology is perhaps another. I think biology does count. You know, historical memory. Whatever the reasons are, I think that this is one of the things that feminism has self-corrected, in terms of women feeling free to make choices.

Karen Miller's comments about women withdrawing from excessively demanding jobs, and that maybe the old models had wisdom—I think there's something else going on, and the new book called *The Perfect Mother* points it out. What is driving women crazy is not juggling the demands of work on the one hand and family on the other hand, but the societal expectation that they will live perfect lives and have perfectly accomplished children, that their children will be excellent in any number of musical and balletic and gymnastic activities. It's trying to meet

those other societal expectations, not the family-job thing, which is really making things difficult. Some of the women who are withdrawing from working outside the home are doing so in order to have perfectly decorated homes and perfectly decorated children. And, when we say older role models, Karen, we really need to be careful about which historical models we are thinking about.

I want to thank Shula for the observation that all people have conflicting obligations. I would simply say that within Orthodox Judaism, one of the factors that enters in is the fact that one really needs to have that *minyan* three times a day, and the guys—and I mean “guys” here—the guys that come to those *minyanim* are a particular type. They are really devoted to doing it. They are a particular type of person, and they do it partially for social reasons, because their group will be upset if they don't get there in the morning, but also because of a sense of religious obligation. I'm not sure, when an obligation is taken on voluntarily, whether one becomes obsessive enough to make that *minyan* happen when the weather is the way it has often been this winter, and when it's really, really inconvenient. I think it's a terrific thing for women to take things on. I did it when I needed to do it, but we need to be conscious that it's not simple, and we don't want to lose that bedrock of guys who really feel like they're committed.