

## *Women Today—An Orthodox View*

BLU GREENBERG

### *I*

It goes without saying that feminism has had a powerful impact on Judaism during the past three decades. This is most evident in the liberal denominations. Women rabbis, gender inclusive texts, elimination of inequities in Jewish divorce law, inclusion of women in public prayer roles—it is quite a different landscape from the previous two thousand years.

But what about Orthodoxy? Contrary to the stereotypical view that nothing ever changes here; contrary to the fact that in the traditional community feminism does not carry the weight of interpretive principle by which to reinterpret halakha; and contrary to the hefty pull of Orthodoxy to the right—there has been considerable ferment and activity. I believe the reader will be surprised at some of the developments of the last two decades. I, too, have found them to be surprising, remarkable, and a source of hope as well.

### *II*

Before detailing the impact of feminism on contemporary Orthodoxy, let us briefly summarize seven areas of the tradition in need of attention and/or repair:

1. **Language.** To a great extent, language of Scriptures and liturgy is noninclusive. For example, God is referred to by use

of male pronoun; God is the God of our fathers; when community is addressed, it is often the males who are spoken to as in "... you and your wife (wives) ..."

2. **Legal Testimony.** Only men may serve as witnesses in religious courts of law.
3. **Family Law.** In a divorce proceeding, Jewish law prescribes that the man issue the writ of divorce [*get*] to the woman and not vice versa. This allows for a situation in which a man may withhold the *get*, for reasons of spite or blackmail, from a woman who initiates divorce action.
4. **Prayer and Community.** In the communal liturgy, the *minyan*, women's presence was neither halakhically mandated nor recognized. In halakhic consequence of that fact, women did not participate in public liturgical roles, such as being called up to the Torah or leading the congregation in prayer.<sup>1</sup>
5. **Life Cycle Ceremonies.** Throughout the millennia, ritual ceremonies were developed to mark the entry or growth of males from one stage to another. Parallel *rites de passage* for females did not evolve.
6. **Learning.** The Talmud explicitly exempts women from the mitzvah of studying Torah, a daily obligation for male Jews.
7. **Leadership Roles.** Tradition dictates, more by absence of discussion than by argument, the inadmissibility of women to leadership roles, rabbinic and lay alike. Not surprisingly, history has provided us with very few models.

### III

This, then, is what the tradition taught. This is what Rabbinic Judaism transmitted generation to generation. And this is what modern Orthodoxy looked like some thirty years ago, when the women's movement first tendered its new theology of women.

What has happened during the recent past? To understand the global picture, we must examine the issue item by item.

1. **Language.** Here one must acknowledge that there is no change, not a single sacred word. This is in sharp contrast to the liberal denominations where, for example, language inclusive (i.e., non-sexist) prayer books are becoming the norm and not the radical exception.

When it comes to changing ancient texts and liturgies, I must admit to a measure of ambivalence. Not long ago, a Los Angeles rabbi related an incident which took place in his synagogue, a large Conservative congregation with several parallel *minyanim* running concurrently on Shabbat mornings. At one of these, a *havurah*-type *minyan*, the service was being led by a woman. She had just reached the point of repetition of the amidah prayer, one of the oldest parts of the liturgy, (thought by many to be over twenty-five hundred years old). Whether spontaneous or pre-planned—but certainly without prior consultation—she amended the opening blessing. To the phrase “Blessed are You, Lord our God ruler of the universe, the God of Abraham, . . . Isaac, . . . Jacob . . .” she added these new words: . . . “the God of Sarah, . . . Rebecca, . . . Rachel and Leah . . .”

Some members of the *minyan* balked, upset that a formula so hallowed with time could be so casually altered. Others felt that it was about time, in fact, long overdue. “Reform Judaism introduced this a dozen years earlier and the skies have not fallen in.” “. . . But you cannot change what is community norm . . .” “We are the descendants of the Matriarchs as well, and they deserve a remembering for what they did to carry on the line.” “Who gave you the authority?”

And so the argument went back and forth. After much debate, it was decided to take the matter to the rabbi for a halakhic verdict. He deemed it weighty enough to turn over to the Law Committee of the Conservative movement which turned the question back to him with the request that he write a *teshuva* (responsum). Over the course of several months, he researched the issue in halakhic texts, found a Maimonidean source to justify the change and sent his *teshuva* back to the Law Committee. The latter body consulted, deliberated, and just that very week had arrived at a decision affirming the rabbi’s finding.

As I listened to him, I found myself probing the matter in the two places where I have tested every step of this revolution—in my mind and in the pit of my stomach. The mind was telling me that Maimonides is used as a most legitimate source for so many other halakhic decisions of our times, therefore, why not include the names of our foremothers? The visceral reaction was one of anxiety; it was about altering sacrosanct liturgies; it was about widening the breach between Conservative and Orthodox Jews.

Personal ambivalence aside, there is virtually no discussion of language issues in Orthodoxy; anyone who attempts to revise or repair inherited texts is immediately suspect of betraying the trust.

Yet, I have heard well supported rumors of several leading Orthodox rabbis who as a matter of principle, refrain from reciting the morning blessing, "shelo asani isha," "... who has not made me a woman." They do this quietly, without fanfare, without publicly repudiating or changing its text, but they do it with sensitivity to the issue of language and its slights.

Moreover, as we shall shortly see, where there is a flowering of new prayer, women's persona and past models are often incorporated.

Finally, it is not difficult to notice that many Orthodox rabbis, in their sermons and teachings, take care to use phrases such as "he or she," "men and women." This is in sharp contrast to previous rabbinic use of the male pronoun as the generic term for human beings and for community. Not only does this indicate increased sensitivity to issues of language and to the presence of women, but it also tempers a bit one of the strongest arguments in favor of changing language, i.e., that language and its images inform the psyche in a subtle, subconscious and, therefore, exceedingly powerful way. If, in fact, those who are unalterably opposed to changing the language of Scriptures and liturgy are able to be sensitive and mindful of women in their other speech, then perhaps a compromise can be struck.

2. **Legal Testimony.** The law is explicit. Only men qualify as witnesses. Consequently, here too, there has been no discussion of the issue in the community. The fact that women in the Conservative rabbinate recently reversed their original decision *not* to serve in the capacity of witness (to marriage and divorce) has become an anathema to the Orthodox rabbinate. Since legal documents thus witnessed are invalid according to halakha, some Orthodox rabbis argue that this step is even more divisive than that of women as rabbis.

Does this mean that no woman can give testimony in the religious courts? Despite the unambiguity of halakha, I see signs of change on the horizon. For one, it has been a practice of Israeli rabbinic courts for some time now to incorporate women's testimony, albeit through the back door. Technically, the court is disbanded and the "testimony" of a woman is taken. The court is then

formally reconvened and those who deliberate on the issue may use the information supplied by the woman.

But a most interesting development is now taking place in Israel, where issues of family status come under the jurisdiction of the religious court. As of 1990, a woman who is party to a divorce proceeding has the option of bringing along to the court an auxiliary person—a woman—to give her support and to speak and argue on her behalf. Heretofore, women were not admitted to religious court proceedings in this capacity. The Israel Women's Network was instrumental in bringing this about. Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, an eminent Orthodox rabbi, is among those who are now training women in Israel to serve in this role.

Because of the domino effect, it seems likely that at some point in the future, the Orthodox will have to deal more extensively with the formal issue of woman as witness.

3. **Family Law.** During the past few decades, feminism has had a dual impact on the phenomenon of divorce in western society. At one level, there is growing acknowledgment that women should have no less power over their personal lives or decisions than have men. Consequently, any law—civil or religious—that harbors the potential for imbalance or inequity is called into question. At another level, with its new emphasis on independence and self-sufficiency, feminism has contributed to an accelerated rate of female initiated divorce.

No sector of the Jewish community has been sheltered from these two forces—the attitudinal and the sociological/demographic. But in the Orthodox community where Jewish law dictates that the husband alone is empowered to give the *get*, the situation becomes more complex. Female initiated divorce has given rise to an increase in recalcitrant husbands, men who withhold the *get* for spite or blackmail. But simultaneously within the community, there is greater awareness and acceptance of the principle of equality in family law. As these two realities continue to be joined, divorce halakha will come under ever greater scrutiny, and rightly so!

We can already identify six distinct stages the community has moved through in dealing with the problem during the past twenty-five years:

The first stage was one of denial and unresponsiveness: total denial that a problem existed and deliberate unresponsiveness to

those who identified the problem and offered solutions. It must be said, to their abiding credit, that there were those who valiantly struggled to solve the problem of the *agunah*, those women whose husbands were missing and therefore unable to deliver the *get* as well as those anchored to an absentee husband who malevolently withheld the *get*. More than two decades ago, scholars such as Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits, Emanuel Rackman and Ze'ev Falk, searched the literature and wrote treatises on halakhic mechanisms to prevent or release an *agunah*. But their ideas and solutions were dismissed out of hand within the halakhic community. No counter measures were offered by rabbinic leadership, and no support was forthcoming from a concerned but unawares laity.

The second stage might be called the apologetic stage. Certain rabbis began to engage the issue, arguing that contrary to the perception of feminists, Jewish divorce law was designed to protect women. They made no attempt to change or critique the status quo, but rather felt a need to justify the system indirectly by stressing its good treatment of women.

While some might snicker at this apologetic proposition, it is not entirely without basis. Compare biblical law, in which a man was required to give his wife a writ of divorce, to parallel cultures in which the irrevocable oral divorce was the law of the land. If a wife exceedingly angered her husband, he would walk to the door, hold it open, and summarily summon his wife to walk out as he pronounced the divorce formula aloud three times. Without even collecting her belongings, she was required to walk through the door and never return. A woman had to tiptoe about quite gingerly in that kind of society. By contrast, Jewish divorce law required the writing of the *get* and its delivery to her in her hands. At the very least, this served as a delaying tactic; at best, an opportunity for family and community intervention.

Moreover, if one continues to analyze the development of Jewish divorce law through rabbinic and post-rabbinic times, the underlying truth becomes evident: halakha improved upon Biblical law. One could easily discern a trend of increased protection for women.

While the apologetic position does not deal with the harsh realities of individual women being blackmailed, it does offer something to build upon: a theoretically positive orientation towards women in the original law and its continued positive development.

Thus, continued emendation of divorce halakha can be understood as working towards its own best values.

The third stage can be called, for want of a better term, the "hand-wringing" stage. This stage was considerable progress over denial and apologetics, for now the problem began to be acknowledged by those other than the victims. What is the hand-wringing stage? When a rabbi says, "It is a problem, a terrible problem. I feel great sympathy. But that's halakha; and halakha can not be changed. What can I do?" or "Yes, it's true that some suffer unjustly, but no legal system can be calibrated so that not a single individual will ever suffer injustice."

Stage Four was the civil court solution: to attach a Jewish divorce to civil divorce proceedings. If a recalcitrant husband refused to authorize the *get*, the civil judge could fine or even incarcerate him until he complied. This procedure was based legally on those aspects of a Jewish marriage that are contractual in nature. This idea was pushed forward by many Orthodox rabbis, even the most traditional Orthodox, because they understood that a solution must be found, yet also felt constrained by their ideology of no change in halakha. But the idea was opposed by liberals who feared to encroach on their sacred principle of separation of church and state.

The fifth stage was that of the prenuptial agreement. The parties agree that should they ever separate or seek a civil divorce and one or the other impedes the *get*, they will submit to the authority of a rabbinic court and to abide by its mandate—which may be to require the husband to give his wife a *get*.

Typically, the agreement stipulates that if the husband is recusant, he is liable to a financial penalty for every day. While it offers no guarantee—for a husband may still refuse or may flee the jurisdiction—it does add some pressure.

In truth, this procedure has not been widely used in the Orthodox community. Upon inquiry, my daughters related that of their many friends who have been recently married, few have availed themselves of the prenuptial agreement. Only a handful of Orthodox rabbis who perform weddings require it and few others even make the suggestion.

Stage Six, where we are currently positioned, is one that is witnessing the growth of activism in the Orthodox community. Two types of activist organizations exist: one that attempts to achieve

its goals by acting as intermediary between the parties, exerting mild pressure on a recalcitrant husband, using social work techniques; and the other that uses protests, sanctions and publicity against recalcitrant men, and that monitors the religious courts.

Activism expresses itself in other ad hoc patterns. For example, in a nearby community lives a man who has unreasonably withheld the *get* from his wife. Recently, each rabbi of that community announced from his pulpit that the man would not be welcome in the synagogue until he gave his wife a *get*. When it became known that the rabbi of one synagogue would make the announcement at Friday evening services—which are usually not heavily attended by women—several dozen women went out of their way to get to *shul* that evening. As the rabbi stood to speak, the women rose in unison as a symbol of support for him and for the public stand he was taking. Can anyone imagine that this would have happened a decade ago? Surely, I cannot.

Another example of an *ad hoc* activist group is that of several Canadian women who decided to take matters into their own hands. One young woman in their community was being blackmailed by her husband in return for the *get*. Her parents were people of means and wanted to pay so as to release her. But she did not want to give the fellow a dime. One Sabbath morning, before the reading of the Torah, approximately twenty of her friends stood up and announced aloud in *shul* that none of them would go to the *mikvah*, the ritual bath, until their friend had her *get* in hand. (According to halakha, husbands and wives may not resume sexual relations following menses until the wife immerses herself in the *mikvah*.) Their Lysistrata style announcement produced the quickest divorce ever in Jewish history! Levity aside, women in the Orthodox community are beginning to understand that they, too, have levers of power.

A different sort of activism is used occasionally in certain fundamentalist communities. A husband who remains unyielding is physically assaulted until he “decides” that he wants to give his wife a *get*. While more deserving of the term “thuggery” than “activism,” it nevertheless works against a husband’s own brand of thuggery.

Meanwhile, the grave problem of the *agunah* remains. I believe, however, that we are at the threshold of a solution. If we could have moved through those six stages in twenty years, then surely a more

comprehensive solution is at hand. Currently, the problem is solved on a retail basis, one anchored woman by one anchored woman; caring *poskim* continue to seek to find ways of invalidating a marriage. But what is now needed is a wholesale solution, at the level of the law so that the potential for inequity will be forever eliminated and no victim of a recalcitrant husband will ever have to come before the rabbis in humiliation, on her knees.

4. **Prayer and Community.** What do they do, those Orthodox women who want to remain faithful to the tradition yet also want to experience fuller participation in communal liturgies? They organize women's *tefila* (prayer) groups. Why don't they call their assemblies a women's *minyan*? Because in halakhic opinion, women may not constitute a *minyan*. To win legitimacy they have stressed they are *not* a *minyan*. Thus, they omit recitation of certain prayers that require a *minyan*, and they take care not to entitle themselves inappropriately. Rabbi Avi Weiss' defense, in *Women at Prayer*, is predicated on this distinction. Interestingly, despite all this care, they are referred to as "women's *minyan*" by those who seek to discredit them.

The women's *tefila* groups generally meet once a month, the rationale being that women want greater experience and participation but do not want to split off into separate his/her prayer communities. Thus, women's *tefila* remains a sub-community for women within their larger communities and not a break from them. The experience of leading the services, offering a *d'var Torah* or sermon, reading from the Torah with proper cantillations, being called up for an *aliyah*, reciting special blessings of Thanksgiving or special saying, celebrating life-cycle ceremonies and special events in their lives,—these are the components of women's *tefila*. On the one hand, there is none of the creativity that exists in women's liturgy in the liberal denominations. On the other, it satisfies and gratifies traditional women to participate more directly in the familiar, the ancient, the hallowed. This, in itself, is abundantly innovative. And like any other prayer community, women's *tefila* offers occasional peak moments of spirituality.

It must be acknowledged that women's *tefila* groups have not attracted overwhelming numbers of participants. But they are a steady force and, in some communities, have grown in numbers and in size during the last decade. This is particularly remarkable

when one considers the unfriendly reception they have received from traditionalists in the wider Orthodox community. Several years ago, five well known Orthodox rabbis produced a rather mean-spirited statement criticizing the women's *tefila* groups ("women's *minyán*" in their words), accusing them of being nothing more than radical feminist political clubs and not liturgical enterprises in the name of God. It was extraordinarily heavy censure, and it stopped just short of banning these assemblies. Quite amazingly, none of the prayer groups folded under such pressure. Ten years ago, that would not have been the case. Moreover, the heavy-handedness of these particular rabbis managed to make feminists out of some previously mild-mannered participants in the prayer groups.

The Women at the Wall in Israel is a somewhat different and more complex story, but the basic issue is the same: the right of women to assemble and carry on a liturgy as a group, within the parameters of halakhic prayer. Here too, the women were not intimidated, not even by threat of violence. What is more, for the very first time, women in Israel are resorting to the courts to intervene in religious matters, just as feminists in America did after trying other avenues. As has often been the case in Jewish history, politics and halakha are deeply intertwined.

Another novel phenomenon is that of women convening themselves as a quorum to recite the grace after a meal. Tradition teaches that only men may be counted in the *zimmun*, the quorum convened for recitation of the grace. (Women are obligated to recite the grace but as individuals and not as members of a community.)

However, there is also halakhic precedent for three or more women to constitute themselves as a *mezuman* when no men are present. But for most of this century, and probably for the better part of Jewish history, women did not do so. Several years ago, I attended a beautiful pageant prepared by the students in my daughter's class at a local *yeshiva* high school. I remember quite vividly Deborah's particular project. Her task was to comb the biblical sources on water and then to highlight the relationship between water-as-a-source-of-life and Torah-as-a-source-of-life. In addition to her recitation, she created a huge felt display of water and related symbols; in twelve inch high royal blue felt letters she "wrote" at the bottom of her banner the Hebrew words from

Isaiah, "Yea, all who are thirsty go to the waters." Although she was then only fifteen, her project—oral and visual—was very sophisticated. And so were the presentations of many of her classmates.

At that time, the high school consisted of two hundred young women and a learned faculty that was primarily female. The day's program was concluded with a lovely feast which was opened and closed with the appropriate blessings and grace. After being nurtured for two hours by the gifts of intellect and heart of these young women, the principal called in from another part of the building three boys from the eighth grade (post *bat mitzvah*) to constitute the quorum for reciting the grace. Somehow, the asymmetry was startling. Equally startling was that no one seemed to notice or mind whose maturity counted. When I delicately raised the issue afterwards with several friends, I immediately saw the veil drop over their eyes. Recently, however, at first self-consciously and then quite as matter of fact, groups of women have begun to convene their own *zimmun* for recitation of the grace. For AMIT women and EMUNAH women, the two strongest Orthodox women's organizations, this seems to have become standard operating procedure.

There is also a new willingness on the part of Orthodox women to recite the *kiddush*, the sanctification over the wine. The Talmud permits a woman to recite *kiddush* for others, but adds that a curse will befall a man whose wife does so. Perhaps that stigma explains why historically women rarely recited the *kiddush*. In fact, for a woman to have to do so only seemed to heighten the fact that she had no man or boy in her life to fulfill this mitzvah for her. But today, it is no longer considered shameful or scandalous for a woman to recite the ceremonial blessings over the wine. In homes and in synagogues, at family celebrations, *bat mitzvah*, birth ceremony, or congregational *kiddush*, women have been heard to recite the *kiddush*. To be sure, it is far from the norm and in some quarters it still raises eyebrows, but it is not considered an antinomian act. Rather, it is becoming more widely accepted.

Women are taking up other rituals associated with liturgy. For example, during the past few years on Sukkot, I have observed an occasional woman or girl carrying the *lulav* (palm branch) and *etrog* (citron) to the synagogue to hold aloft at appropriate mo-

ments of prayer. This was certainly not part of a Jewish woman's repertoire in previous generations.

Similarly, in a number of modern Orthodox synagogues, a women's *hakafah* has been organized for the holiday of Simkhat Torah. Women carry aloft the *sefer* Torah and dance around it. That these *hakafot* for women generally take place outside of the sanctuary or outside of the *shul* altogether and that relatively few women join in is all to be understood as a ritual-in-process.

One additional example of liturgical change: in the home of a young Orthodox family in Manhattan, it is the learned wife who recites the *havdalah*, their theory being that just as it is woman's responsibility to usher in the Sabbath with the lighting of the candles, so it is her responsibility for the candle of *havdalah*.

5. Life Cycle Ceremonies. Birth. a) One of the most profound rituals in Judaism is the rite of circumcision. More than a medical procedure, it is a covenantal act. What this means is that the eight-day-old infant belongs not only to two sweet young parents, but in reality, is the child of all of us, of the whole community (or, as an out of town friend said to us the night before our son David's *brit*, "Tell your little son for me tomorrow that his loss is our gain."). Through his symbolic initiation into the covenant between God and the Jewish people, he immediately becomes one of our family; we share the covenantal bonds.

Since the time of Abraham, this tradition applied to boys only. Did Jewish girls also become members of the covenantal community? Certainly so, but they entered without ceremony.

After almost four thousand years, birth ceremonies for baby girls have begun to be woven into the fabric of Jewish life. Not yet formalized or standardized, nor established by rabbinic authorities, these ceremonies are the creation of individual families all over the country. By now, many such ceremonies have been privately printed or copied and are widely circulating in the modern Orthodox community. I suspect the way the ritual will become a fixed part of Jewish tradition is this: an enterprising publisher of Jewish prayer books will select one such birth ceremony; he or she will attach to it a title from among the several that are now in use (e.g. *Simkhat Habat*, *Brit Bat*) and will publish it in the new *siddur*. One hundred years from now, few will know whether this ceremony came from Sinai or whether it is but a century old; and in

fact it will make little difference in the holiness and joy of the celebration.

b) Naming a baby girl in the synagogue is not new. Although tradition established no formal covenantal ceremony, it instituted long ago the custom of naming baby girls in *shul* at the time of Torah reading. For reasons which remain unexplained, this naming did not take place at the central communal Torah reading—on Shabbat morning—but rather at a Monday or Thursday *shakharit* (morning) or Shabbat *minkha* (afternoon) Torah reading, with a much smaller community presence. But that too is changing. In many modern Orthodox shuls, baby girls are now often named at the central liturgical moment of Torah reading—on Shabbat morning immediately preceding the *mussaf*.

c) Giving a Jewish name is a matter of great significance. From earliest times (and, as the Rabbis<sup>2</sup> teach, from the very first sojourn in Egypt) no matter what host culture or country, no matter what the conditions of their lives, Jews declared their identity by giving Jewish names and holding fast to them. Traditionally, a Jewish name was composed of a Hebrew name plus the given Hebrew name of the father which became the surname of the child. For example, Benjy Weiss's Jewish name was Binyamin *ben* (son of) Avraham. His sister's name was Dinah *bat* (daughter of) Avraham. In very special circumstances, such as when a special prayer for healing was made, the mother's name was used: Binyamin *ben* Sarah or Dinah *bat* Sarah. But otherwise, at the moment of giving the name and in all other formal usage, only the father's name was appended as surname.

During this last decade, however, at a baby naming in shul or at a *simkhat bat* ceremony, and even at an occasional *brit*, both parents names have been added as surname, as in Binyamin ben Avraham V'Sarah. Women called up to the Torah in women's *tefila* also use the Hebrew names of both parents. Thus far, I have not heard of a bar mitzvah boy being called up to the Torah for his first *aliyah* with his mother's name included, but I suspect that day is not far off.

d) The Jewish "infant formula" was a not so subtle indicator of community expectations. For baby boys, the custom was to recite the formula of greeting at a *brit*: "May he grow to [a life of] Torah, the wedding canopy, and good deeds." For a baby girl, the traditional greeting (recited at her naming) was: "May she grow to the

wedding canopy and to good deeds." During the past decade, one hears the words, "to Torah" inserted into her blessing as well. In most Orthodox shuls, it is now the standard formula.

B. *Bat Mitzvah*. The celebration of *bar mitzvah*—a boy becoming an adult Jew under the canopy of Torah—is a relatively late custom in Judaism, only several hundred years old. But the celebration of *bat mitzvah* began only yesterday, as Jews count time. It was an innovation of liberal Jews in the early part of this century. In fact, up until a score of years ago, *bat mitzvah* celebration evoked suspicion and derision within Orthodoxy.

Not so any longer. As Jewish education spreads increasingly to young women, as the feminist notion of openly celebrating women's experience has gained strength, the rabbinic definition of Jewish female adulthood—at age 12—is affirmed in a public context.

*Bat mitzvah* celebrations within the Orthodox community are even less standardized than *simkhat bat* ceremonies. The settings run the gamut. For example: a *kiddush* in the home, accompanied by speeches and *divrei Torah*; a celebration at the *yeshiva* day school; family and friends spending Shabbat at a hotel to extend the honor of the event; marking the event in *shul* with rituals such as the father of the girl called up for an *aliyah* and/or reading the Torah, the rabbi of the congregation calling upon the girl and her mother to stand in their pews as he addresses the *bat-mitzvah*; the presentation by the young woman of a *d'var Torah* before the entire congregation gathered for *shaleshudos* (the third Sabbath meal) in the synagogue vestry between *mincha* and *maariv* prayer services; the presentation of a *d'var Torah* by the *bat mitzvah* from the *bimah* to the entire congregation, following Shabbat morning services; the celebration of a *siyyum Mishnah*, the conclusion of a tractate which she had studied during the entire year as preparation for becoming *bat mitzvah*.

Another significant celebration of *bat mitzvah* has been that which takes place in the women's *tefila* groups. During the first half of the dozen years of existence of the Riverdale Women's *Tefila*, the number of 12-year-old girls who celebrated their *bat mitzvah* in this sub-community could be counted on one hand. But during the last six years, there have been a handful each year. The young woman will read her portion of the Torah and *haftorah*, deliver a *d'var Torah*, lead the prayers. She may do all of the above, or

600  
Bronx NY,  
10471

enlist family and friends to share some of these roles. At the most recent celebration, the girl's mother lead the warm-up and *shakharit* prayers, a friend read the haftarah, and the *bat mitzvah* girl read from the Torah, delivered a d'var Torah, and lead the *mussaf*. After *aleinu*, a dozen little girls came up to the bimah and led the concluding prayers.

The *bat mitzvah* girl is called up for an *aliyah* and is given a special blessing by the *gabbait*. Everything is connected to her identity with Torah. All of this is followed by a *kiddush* or luncheon in her honor. No more the shy 12-year-old sliding silently into Jewish adulthood.

Two other unique *bat mitzvah* celebrations stand out in my mind, one of a decade ago, the other of recent vintage. The first was a Tu Bi'Shvat *sefer*. The young girl spent a year with a special teacher studying the traditional sources on all that had to do with trees and fruits of *the land of Israel*. Her texts were primarily Talmud and Midrash. She and her family compiled a Tu Bi'Shvat *haggadah* which was given to each guest at the feast, at which foods and fruits of the Holy Land were served. She read and taught from the *haggadah* while the guests followed along in their texts. It was a unique Torah learning experience for all.

On Purim of 5751 (1991), another first in Jewish history (of the Orthodox community) took place. To celebrate this day in her life the *bat mitzvah* girl read the Purim *megillah*. She read it for the entire congregation, male and female guests alike, in the main sanctuary of the *shul*. According to the tradition, the *megillah* reading is the one Torah reading where a woman reader may fulfill a man's obligation to hear the *megillah* as well as her own. This young woman read all ten chapters, alternating voices from deep stentorian tones for King Ahasuerus, to gravelly ones for Haman, to a sweet soprano for Esther. *Divrei Torah* followed: her own, family members and guests including several Orthodox rabbis (among them her uncle and grandfather). The liturgical feast was followed by a culinary one. As I participated with great joy, I thought of the wonderful memories that she will carry with her for the next fifty years of her life. What a contrast to the Orthodox women of my generation, who can recall their sweet sixteen parties but not the day of their *bat mitzvah*—because there was nothing to remember.

C. Marriage. In the traditional Jewish wedding ceremony, the bride and female guests have few vocalized roles. The bride is cov-

ered with the veil by her husband (*bedeken*); she walks seven times around her husband under the wedding canopy;<sup>3</sup> she hears the marriage declaration and accepts the ring on her index finger; she acquires the *ketubah* (the marriage contract). But traditionally, she recites no words. Nor do any of the women guests participate in any of the special honors associated with the wedding ceremony.

Now I am certain that brides of the past did not take umbrage or slight at the beautiful traditional wedding ceremony. The reality was that no matter how little formal ritual participation, the traditional Jewish bride, as brides in every culture, was still the center of the universe.

Nevertheless, some brides now want to have their female friends share in the ritual; and some want to have a more expressive role themselves. Here are several of the new customs that have grown during this last score of years:

*ITEM.* One of the most beautiful pre-ceremony customs is the *bedeken*, the veil covering ritual. The groom, accompanied in song and dance by a male entourage, approaches his bride and gently draws the veil over her face. Just before that moment of veiling, a most poignant custom takes place: the father of the bride places his hands over her head and blesses her. The father of the groom follows suit. In very recent times, some mothers have also joined in blessing the bride.

*ITEM.* One Orthodox rabbi lately instructs the bride to present the groom with a *tallit* at the time of the *bedeken*.

*ITEM.* Women hold up the poles of a portable *huppah* (the marriage canopy).

*ITEM.* A female guest reads the *ketubah* (marriage contract) during the ceremony. Some rabbis will allow a woman to read only the English translation of the Aramaic *ketubah*, but there are other Orthodox weddings where a woman has read the *ketubah* in the original.

*ITEM.* A bride recites under the *huppah* some words of love, usually taken from Song of Songs. In such instances, this is done after the marriage ceremony has technically and formally been completed (by the groom's recitation of the marriage formula, "Behold, with this ring you are consecrated unto me according to the laws of Moses and Israel.") Oftentimes, the bride will recite her words after the *ketubah* has been read or after the *sheva berakhot*, so as to distinguish her words from the traditional mar-

riage ritual. Similarly, where a bride wishes to give her husband a ring, she will do it in a manner that does not confuse it with a double ring ceremony. Some Orthodox rabbis will not permit a bride to give a ring under the *buppah* altogether, but others who do are careful to point out what is tradition and what is not.

*ITEM.* At a recent Orthodox wedding, at the conclusion of the ceremony but before the breaking of the glass, seven women were called up to the *buppah*, one at a time. Each recited words of blessing, corresponding to the *sheva berakhot*, the seven traditional wedding blessings that, moments earlier, had been recited by seven male guests.

*ITEM.* At the *sheva berakhot* celebrations that take place during the week following the wedding, the seven blessings are again recited each night. On occasion, women have been invited to recite the individual blessings.

Several of the pre-ceremony customs have also been adapted to include:

*ITEM.* At the traditional *aufruf*, which usually takes place on a Shabbat preceding the wedding, the groom is called up to the Torah for an *aliyah*. Oftentimes a *kiddush* following the services celebrates the *aufruf*. Very recently, at women's *tefila* services, a bride's *aufruf* is celebrated. She is called up to the Torah for an *aliyah*, reads her Torah portion if she is able or gives a *d'var Torah*. A *kiddush* is celebrated in her honor.

*ITEM.* Another variation on this theme has been grafted onto the Shabbat *kallah*, the bride's Sabbath before the wedding. This is typically a time when the bride's family and close friends will keep her company and attend to her. Recently, the Shabbat *kallah* also includes a *shiur* (the studying sacred texts) which her friends will have prepared in her honor.

*ITEM.* The *kallah's tish* is derived from the custom of *chattan's tish*, (groom's table), the pre-ceremony gathering of men (around a table set with light fare) where the groom will recite words of Torah. At the first *kallah's tish* that I attended several years ago, the *d'var Torah* was presented by the bride's sister, a teacher of Talmud.

D. Death. In this complex, highly emotional and acutely sensitive area, we can observe the interplay of several forces:

1. Because of its associated mystery and taboo, death has tended to sharpen the divide between the sexes. One example of this

is women's participation in burial rites. In certain cemeteries run by the more right-wing *bevra kadisha* (holy burial) societies, women may not enter the cemetery but must remain at the entrance gate. (In some extreme instances, this includes the female mourner as well.)

2. Yet, because of the intense grief and need to be comforted, it was logical that the impulse of lovingkindness and consolation would bridge the separation. Thus, for example, at many Orthodox funerals, male and female visitors will be seated separately in the funeral parlor, but the family of mourners will sit together, undivided by gender.
3. On the other hand, the domino effect of one aspect of tradition upon the other—in this case, women's more circumscribed liturgical role—mutes a woman's natural inclination to participate in rituals of mourning. In the absence of obligation upon them to be part of the *minyan*, women mourners typically do not recite the mourner's *kaddish* (recited in the presence of a *minyan* in the mourner's home) even though they recite all other parts of the service, such as the *kedusha* or the *borchu* which may also be recited only in a *minyan*.
4. Because of the vulnerability of the moment, decisions rendered on the spot by others are unquestioned and unchallenged. Occasionally, women will describe a sense of bewilderment at being told, "no" to that which they would instinctively want to give expression. For example: at the moment that a female relative or friend she feels the urge to join others at the cemetery who, one by one, have taken up a shovel to heave a bit of earth on the coffin, a sign of honor and closeness to the deceased, she is told that "only men may do so." At that moment a woman would not think of creating a stir. Or at times, women mourners are banished to the kitchen or hallway during the services and consequently miss the learning segment where a guest also speaks of the character of the deceased. Only after the fact do some women articulate their heightened sense of loss at not being able to honor the dead or accept consolation in the same manner as male family and friends.

But the new sense of self and of emotional entitlement has impacted on all of the above.

*Kaddish* is one area where this can be seen. *Kaddish* is a most powerful healing ritual. Recited daily at the communal prayer services during the eleven months following the death of a parent (or thirty days for other members of the immediate family), the *kaddish* helps a mourner knit together in the framework of a loving community. Some few women (far fewer than in the liberal denominations where many women recite the daily *kaddish*) have taken upon themselves the daily *kaddish*. Several have described the spiritual experience, the psychological and emotional value, as well as the gradual process of their integration into the healing community.

Regarding the latter, the process usually runs something like this: during the first few mornings, the regulars of an Orthodox *minyan* are somewhat uncomfortable as a woman appears, and everyone shifts around a bit uneasily. Since the weekday services are attended only by men, and in fewer numbers than on a Shabbat, these services are often held in a small room or chapel of the synagogue, where there is no *mechitza* (partition screen or curtain separating men and women). Therefore, for the first few mornings, a woman usually recites prayers and *kaddish* from the hall. Within a very few days, a special section is created for her by a *mechitza*, so that she need not remain out in the hall. Little by little, she becomes part of the group of regular "*minyanaives*," though services will never begin until ten men have assembled.

Few of the women who have described their experience over the course of a year have ever reported a continuing hostility towards them. On the contrary, after the initial hesitation and suspicion, a woman is generally treated with graciousness and welcome. By the time the eleventh month rolls around, she has become such a regular feature of the group that the men are sorry to see her leave, which inevitably she does. So far.

Altogether new is a woman offering a *d'var Torah* at a *shiva minyan*. *Shiva* is the seven-day mourning period following burial. During these seven days, the mourners stay at home, sit on low wooden stools, and are visited by family and friends who come to comfort, distract, help, listen. . . . A *minyan* is held at the home of the mourners so that the *kaddish* can be recited during the morning, afternoon, and evening prayers. In order for an additional *kaddish* to be recited, and in order to create a demarcation between the afternoon and evening prayers which are usually held in tan-

dem, five to ten minutes of study are inserted between the two. Usually, one of the visitors will teach a few verses from the Mishnah and then relate its context to the life of the deceased.

At one particular *kaddish minyan* not long ago, it was the granddaughter and granddaughter-in-law who taught the *mishnayot* between the afternoon and evening prayers. I am quite certain that this was the first time in Jewish history that such a thing was done. How did it come to be? As for most "firsts," there's a story behind it.

Both granddaughters live simultaneously in the Orthodox community and in the modern world. Both are well educated. One is also a strong feminist. Both were trained to show great respect for their grandparents. And because they loved their grandfather very much and were unusually close to him—they wanted to have some special part in this period of mourning.

Now the father/father-in-law of these two young women was not quite comfortable, with their request, although his wife was altogether for it. In fact, had someone other than his children asked the question, he would surely have said "No," not to be recalcitrant but simply because it had never been done before and then as is common, the arguments are lined up around that position. But here it was his own children, and he heard their plea. Yes, they would teach the *mishnayot*.

However, reciting *kaddish* after a woman's learning was more than he could handle. His compromise was that after the two women finished teaching the Mishnah, one male guest would read a single verse from the text and then the *kaddish* could be recited. Perhaps in a few years, or perhaps now at some *kaddish minyan* elsewhere in this country, a woman will teach the Mishnah and those assembled will recite the *kaddish* immediately following.

6. **Learning.** Search for the focus of feminist values in a particular denomination and you will find it in a different place in each one. In Orthodoxy, it is in the study of sacred texts that feminism has most powerfully taken root. One example that points up the difference is the reclaiming of *Rosh Hodesh* as a woman's holiday. While a host of monthly rituals and worship have been introduced by religious feminists of other denominations, Orthodox women have tended to mark the new month with special learning groups. In my community, during the past few years the local Amit and

Emunah women's groups have scheduled *Rosh Hodesh sheurim* (learning texts).

We are witnessing a virtual explosion of women's learning in the Orthodox community, modern and fundamentalist alike. Some would demur, saying that feminist values have had nothing to do with it but I believe the timing is more than mere coincidence.

The Orthodox community has always emphasized Talmud Torah, with particular attention to the study of Talmud. High value was placed on its learning, and great status was conferred upon the learned. Women, however, were simply not part of this exalted enterprise. My two sisters and I grew up in a home in which primary emphasis was placed on our Jewish education. My parents uprooted themselves and moved across the continent in search of the best Jewish schooling that could be had. But neither my sisters nor I ever were ever introduced to a page of the Talmud in all of our years of elementary, high school and college education. By contrast, male cousins and friends had many pages of Talmud behind them by the time they were thirteen.

That has changed. Today, young women in *yeshiva* day schools are taught Talmud at an early age, at the very same ages as their brothers. Women fill the Honors Talmud class in high schools such as Ramaz. Institutions of higher Jewish traditional learning such as Drisha in New York, and Matan, Machon Lindenbaum, and Nishmat in Israel have been created specifically for women. These academies are outstanding in the level and intensity of learning, the caliber of faculty and students and the scope of texts taught. Before these new institutions were created several fine institutions of higher learning had already begun to introduce the subject of Talmud to women. Yeshiva University's Revel Graduate School and Stern College for Women pioneered in this area as far back as the late 1960's. Whereas for the better part of Jewish history the study of Talmud was largely out of bounds for women, it is now well if not yet widely accepted.

There are all kinds of encouragement for women to develop themselves in areas of Jewish learning. In their local communities, women study Torah, Talmud and other serious texts; but of equal significance, they manage to carve out the time for regular learning and *shiurim*. A once uncommon sight is now almost taken for granted: women walking through the streets on a Shabbat afternoon—in communities where there is an *eruv*—with a tractate of

surely, a woman's presence in sacred settings is becoming normal, natural, familiar, everyday. The taboos against seeing her and hearing her in the performance of communal acts of holiness are being lifted.

One independent confirmation comes from a surprising place, the *eruv*. The Shabbat *eruv* (mixing together) is a rabbinic institution that transforms the nature of real property. It addresses the proscription against transporting items on Shabbat through the public domain. In some communities, this proscription limited mobility and comfort on Shabbat. The Rabbis of the Talmud ingeniously created the concept of *eruv* to enhance one's Shabbat, the joy of the day. The *eruv* "mixed" together public and private domains. Through this legal fiction, the public domain becomes an extension of the private and thus, one may carry through it.

Legal fiction alone, however, cannot transform the domain. The Rabbis mandated a physical bridging of the areas.

Today, connected telephone poles, fences, wires, ropes, etc., create a circumference that encircles and links together public and private domains. It takes a considerable amount of effort, ingenuity and expense to erect and maintain an *eruv* that encloses an entire neighborhood. This explains why, for the better part of American Jewish history, few Orthodox communities had one. (The liberal denominations do not accept as binding the injunction not to carry on the Sabbath.)

It was mothers of the young, who could not "transport" an infant or carriage who were most affected by lack of an *eruv*. Oftentimes, mothers of very young children did not see the inside of a synagogue on the Sabbath for months at a time. What is more, no one questioned their absence. Now that I live in a community that has an *eruv*, it seems almost strange; but that is the way it was for young families during all the years when our children were babies. Occasionally, I hired a baby-sitter; but more often I simply did not go.

During the past fifteen years, there has been a tremendous expansion of *eruvim* (pl.) in the U.S.—wherever there are concentrations of young Orthodox families. On Sabbath morning, one can see a plethora of strollers lined up outside of *shul*, testimony to the presence of young mothers whose own mothers and grandmothers minded their children at home on Sabbath mornings. Today, a self-respecting couple of child-bearing age would think twice about

Typesetter:

De-italicize  
all words  
that are  
circled.

x ✓  
x ✓  
x ✓

moving to an "eruvless" neighborhood; prospective home buyers make it their first question; even real estate brokers in Jewish neighborhoods put the word "eruv" into their ads. Women's presence in shul on Shabbat is anticipated!

2. The second reason these small signs and are so important is that this is a community that lives by precedent. Each individual experience,—previously untried but now deemed to be not contrary to halakha—expands the art of the possible. Each "kosher" precedent, legitimate in one halakha-abiding community or family, can be replicated by others. Of course, there are those who would quarrel with the idea of a woman reading the *ketubah* at a wedding. But there are others who would say, "Well, if it was permissible at that wedding, performed by Rabbi X, then perhaps we can do the same at our wedding." Or procedurally more correct, "Let us ask Rabbi X if we may introduce that at our wedding."

The power of a model is far greater than impassioned argument. You can have a thousand discussions on what women may or may not do, but if you have one live case that has passed halakhic muster, the argument is over—better yet, never engaged.

Of course, it is a far slower process, these small signs, cranking it out inch by inch. There is much to recommend against so slow and cautious a pace. Is there anything at all to be said in its favor?

I believe so. One is the phenomenology of the vertical chain. If you take incremental steps, as opposed to giant ones, you feel more joined to the tradition, continuous with it. A sense of continuity is more than legal; it must also be psychological. When there is organic change, everything seems to fit; novelty is experienced not as novelty; change is perceived as being not in tension with what went before but rather as flowing forward smoothly through time, history, and community. This sense of connectedness is one of the great strengths of Orthodoxy.

Similarly, the dilatory response of Orthodoxy has uniquely enabled us to monitor a broader issue: the effects of a new social ideology upon a normative monotheism. Modern Jews still do not know how to answer the vital question: to what extent and at what pace can you change from what was, yet continue to feel tied to Revelation. Introducing change can both enhance and diminish the ability to hear the Commanding Voice. The question is: what is the cut-off point that reverses direction downwards? Orthodoxy offers a model of a community that, remarkably, has maintained

both the authority and the sense of Revelation through all the intervening years since Sinai. Of feminism and Orthodoxy it ultimately might be said: there are two ways to get to the revolution.

A second thought about the benefits accruing from the marriage of feminism and a slow moving Orthodoxy: all of the answers about equality of roles are not yet in. Why should gender distinctive roles automatically and categorically be equated with inequity? Who knows but that a blurring of all the lines, and at rapid pace, might not be a blueprint for great confusion ahead? A (de facto) feminist definition of equality-as-identity, seems not quite adequate to the human condition; certainly not as fitting or felicitous as one that allows for distinctive roles beyond pure biological ones.

To be sure, the very broad role distinctions in Judaism for male and female that we have inherited and that have limited women's access (e.g., men—learning and leadership, women—family and home) certainly will have to go. Much of it has already fallen away. But doing away with global distinctions does not mean that there is no room for maintaining and creating some very specific, well defined roles and rituals for each gender.

Why ritual? Because one you acknowledge that there is value to retaining gender definitions beyond biology, once you affirm that it is possible to hold in harmony equality and gender distinctiveness, then finely detailed ritual is a warm spirited, non-selfcentered way to differentiate. Ultimately, it is ritual that has the capacity to take differences beyond the immediacy of interpersonal relationships to a transcendent place.

A tradition that moves with greater caution in redefining male and female roles serves not only as recorder and anchor for Jews but also carries a message of value for all of contemporary society.

#### V

Having said that I must say the other, lest anyone confuse my defense of a measured response with legitimation of reflexive nay-saying, my affirmation of distinctiveness with an excuse for freezing the status quo. We still have a long way to go in Orthodoxy. We still have much to learn from the other denominations. We still have to open our ears and hear what society's new message is all about. Inequity in divorce is outright inequity, not distinctiveness. The problem must be resolved, swiftly and in total good

faith. Prayer groups deserve a better hearing. If open welcome and praise be beyond the current communal reach, then at the very least, there must be a moratorium on suspicion and scorn.

The formalization of rituals that affirm the covenantal experiences of girls and of women; religious expression given to events and sensations that are unique to women; the broader realization of women's aspirations to religious leadership—all of this lies ahead.

## VI

Given that reality, why write in so sanguine a manner about the small signs? Some would argue that Orthodoxy has so great a distance to go on women's issues that to say anything positive is akin to Uncle Tomism. At the very least, it is a premature pat on the back. And I know the facts. Only yesterday was my reverie shattered in a conversation with one of the dozen women I cited above as future Talmud scholars. After ten years of intensive Talmud study, she is switching fields. "An uphill battle for acceptance and legitimacy in the world of yeshiva learning . . . , a professional dead end. . ." As I stood on the corner listening to her, I couldn't help but think, with all that talent scholarship and talent turned away, the heavens must be weeping.

Still, I believe there is value to singing the partial praises of feminism-in-Orthodoxy. There are many reasons and one of them is the truth. That means telling the whole story. Once you stop believing that, once you take the slippery slope of half truths, you fall easily into exaggeration, rhetoric, and even lying.

Secondly, it is crucial for those who fear change will destroy the whole system to be able to see that it is simply not so. Such a fear is groundless and a look at the new realities can only help to dispel their panic. Orthodoxy is flourishing with the greater spiritual energy and intellect of women. To detail and to ungrudgingly applaud the new signs is a way of encouraging and inviting in.

Moreover, a clear sighted look at the way Orthodox feminists have gone about their business should reassure even the most implacable opponent of change. Everything has been done with total fidelity to tradition and its authority. The halakha remains binding as ever upon women, including those who innovate. Even agunot, who could end their personal misery by finding recourse elsewhere, do not bolt. Their faithfulness is unfathomable. Similarly,

those who stall often do so not only out of a legitimate desire to protect the tradition but also because they believe that feminism has destroyed the family. True, the Jewish family is under siege. True, some aspects of feminism have contributed to its erosion. But not because of women's heightened participation in ritual, not because of women's immersion in the teachings of the Rabbis, not because of women's tefila groups where young children see their mothers daven and rejoice in Yiddishkeit, not because of pressure for equality in divorce law which restores glory to a just religion. All of this heightens commitment and identity which in turn strengthens the family. Besides, the larger picture is that equality in status, ritual and role generate a sense of equality in the relationship; that, and not hierarchy, is what contributes to a healthy stable family in our times.

## VII

Which brings us to the very last point. How will all of this move ahead? I believe that it will happen largely to the extent that women in the Orthodox community will desire. At this moment in time, the majority of women in the Orthodox community are more oriented to preserving the status quo on many of these issues. That largely explains why the whole community has moved very cautiously and why the rabbinic leaders have not used the powers of interpretation given into their hands.

But to say that change will occur precisely in relationship to the growing and future readiness of Orthodox women is to say something glorious about the whole system. It is not a closed system as some would think, but rather a dynamic one, one that can blend tradition and contemporary values; one that can accommodate individual and group needs within the larger unity and with integrity to the faith system.

As feminism increasingly acts upon the lives of women in the Orthodox community, the process will move forward, the halakha will again open to interpretation, and we will see within it a definition of equality and distinctiveness of the sexes that will carry us faithfully forward into the next four thousand years of Jewish life.

that are unique to women; the broader realization of women's aspirations to leadership—all of this lies ahead.

## XI

Which brings us to the very last point. How will all of this happen? I believe that it will happen largely to the extent that women in the Orthodox community will want it to be so. At this moment in time the majority of women in the Orthodox community are more oriented to preservation of the status quo on these issues. That largely explains why the whole community has moved very cautiously and why the rabbinic leaders have not used the powers of interpretation given into their hands. But to say that change will occur precisely in relationship to the growing and future readiness of Orthodox women is to say something glorious about the whole system. It is not a closed system as some would think, but rather a dynamic one, one that can blend tradition and contemporary values; one that can accommodate individual and group needs within the larger unity and with integrity to the faith system.

As feminism increasingly acts upon the lives of women in the Orthodox community, the process will move forward, the halakhah will open to interpretation, and we will see within it a definition of equality and distinctiveness of the sexes that will carry us faithfully forward into the next four thousand years of Jewish life.

### Notes

1. I am indebted to Judith Romney Wegner of Providence, Rhode Island, who shared this insight with me in a personal conversation several years ago.
2. Some think this is a sexist custom, the groom standing in the middle and his bride and mother and mother-in-law circling about him: he is the center of the relationship, a Jewish prince. While any given act can be interpreted on multiple levels, I believe the sexist interpretation is way off the mark. It is not consistent with the basic thrust of the ceremony—a sanctification of the union—nor with the contents of the *ketubah*—which focus primarily on his obligations to her and not vice versa.