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ORTHODOX, FEMINIST, AND PROUD OF IT

Blu Greenberg

AFTER THIRTY YEARS OF steadily pulsing its messages into the culture, feminism has reached deeply even into the most traditional religious communities. The radical transformation of divorce law in Egypt—making it easier for women to end a marriage—is but one example. Discussion among American Catholics about the ordination of women is another.

Orthodox Judaism, too, has been touched by this new social movement. Orthodox feminism, once considered an oxymoron, is a fact of life. Questions about women's roles and rights are raised daily on issues that were uncontested for centuries.

The consciousness of the entire modern Orthodox community has been raised, with rabbis readily acknowledging women's issues to be a primary concern in their congregations. Conferences on feminism and Orthodoxy in 1998 and 2000 turned out record numbers of participants, two thousand strong; many showed up unregistered, boarding planes the night before as if impelled by some mysterious force. The explosion in Jewish women's higher learning is unprecedented, with women studying Talmud as if by natural right. One would not guess that these texts were virtually closed to women for two thousand years.

New Orthodox synagogue architecture reflects the desire to create space in which women will not feel at the periphery, creating a women's section on par with the men's section. Orthodox women's prayer groups, though not universally welcomed, have grown in number and in size. Models of

BLU GREENBERG

women's leadership—congregational interns (the female equivalent to assistant rabbis), presidents of synagogues, principals of Jewish day schools, advocates in the Jewish divorce courts, advisers in halakic (Jewish legal) matters—all are new to the Orthodox scene.

Yet, just as all these gains are being made, *feminism*—the very word itself—has increasingly become a red-flag word inside Orthodoxy. When feminism mattered not at all, it was not a subject for discussion. But suddenly, feminism is at the door—or halfway through the door—of modern Orthodoxy. And many inside have squared off.

Some examples: A mainstream Orthodox women's organization was invited to join as cosponsor of the 1998 Orthodox feminism conference, a role that same group had played the previous year. The organization's leadership said yes, but only on the condition that conference organizers drop *feminism* from the title. (They refused.) And this year, women from eleven countries met to form an international Orthodox feminist organization, but the issue of whether *feminism* should be part of the title went unresolved. Probably half the Orthodox women who would be described by any objective standard as feminist shy away from the word in defining themselves.

At some level, I understand this. During the first ten years of the women's movement, I often used the word *feminism* to criticize excesses; during the next ten, I'd begin statements with "I'm not a feminist but . . ."—though clearly I was speaking the movement's values.

Perhaps the expedient thing to do would be to drop this internally fractious word. Yet each time I consider the idea, I reject it, for many reasons.

To excise *feminism* from the lexicon of Orthodox Jews would constitute a colossal act of ingratitude. Like all women of these times, I have reaped the fruits of the labors of the founding mothers. They took a dedicated and lonely stand for many years, electing to make themselves vulnerable while others lashed out or clucked their tongues.

A second reason not to run scared is that the movement has undergone a great deal of fine-tuning. Men are no longer perceived as the enemy, nor is the family considered the locus of abuse for women. Indeed, feminism serves as a model of how all social movements need time to mature and rebalance.

But there is yet another reason to retain the word: precisely because it continues to rankle and irritate. Even in the midst of fundamental societal change, the temptation to pull back to the old ways is always there. *Feminism*, with its steady beat of cognitive dissonance, prevents that slide.

Carrying the term also offers an Orthodox feminist the opportunity to define what she is, namely, a woman who believes in the equal dignity of

women within Orthodoxy; expanding the spiritual, intellectual, ritual, and communal opportunities for women to the fullest extent possible within halakah; the elimination of all injustice and suffering for Orthodox women arising out of hierarchical laws, such as Jewish divorce law (which puts power to end a marriage totally in the hands of the husband).

What is she not? A nullifier of women in family roles, as the stereotypical charge goes. Nor does she reject the chain of authority; rather, she stays within community, observes *halakah*, and attempts to resolve complaints by engaging those who hold the interpretive keys in their hands, the rabbis.

But as Orthodox feminism is also a movement in its infancy, so it must remain open-minded. As we seek to redefine the role of women in Orthodoxy, we do not yet know what will be preserved as distinctive-but-equal gender roles and what will be judged as hierarchical and unjust, and therefore discarded. Thus, the more dialogue, the more input, the more well-intentioned criticism, the sooner will we be able to sort out matters. All voices should be heard in this process of discovery, even oppositional ones, and they should be heard in the presence of each other, rather than in whispered campaigns and innuendo.

Despite the fact that some believe feminism will destroy or water down Judaism, Orthodox feminism should be understood as a service to the community, a building up of faithfulness and commitment. Women are asking to enter the tradition more fully, not to walk away from it. Thus, feminists should see themselves not as supplicants at the door, but as bearers of a great tradition, refreshing that tradition with women's new spiritual energy and revitalizing it with the ethical challenge of equality for women, thus bringing us one step closer to perfection of the world.