

# FEMINISM WITHIN ORTHODOXY

## A REVOLUTION OF SMALL SIGNS

*Each new  
feminist step  
expands the  
art of the  
possible*

**I**t goes without saying that feminism has had a powerful impact on Jewish life and community during the past three decades — but has it had an effect on Orthodoxy? ■ Contrary to the stereotypical view that nothing ever changes in the Orthodox world, contrary to the fact that feminism (traditionally) does not have the authority to reinterpret *halakha* [Jewish law], and despite the hefty pull of Orthodoxy to the right, feminism has created significant ferment and activity within Orthodoxy. The changes of the last two decades can be seen as a source of considerable hope.

*by Blu Greenberg*

First let us take a quick glimpse at those areas of tradition and *halakha* that have been questioned since the sixties, when the women's movement first tendered its new theology of women. Or, put another way, what exactly has Rabbinic Judaism been transmitting, generation to generation?

**1 LANGUAGE.** To a great extent, language of Scriptures and liturgy is non-inclusive: God is He; God is the God of our fathers; community is often addressed as men, as in "...you and your wife (wives)..."

**2 LEGAL TESTIMONY.** Only men may serve as witnesses in religious courts of law.

**3 DIVORCE.** Jewish law prescribes that the husband issue the writ of divorce [*get*] to the wife. This creates room for great mischief. A spiteful man may withhold the *get* or blackmail a woman who initiates divorce action.

**4 PRAYER.** In prayer groups [*minyanim*], women's presence is *halakhically* neither mandated nor recognized. Consequently, women do not participate in public liturgical roles, such as being called up to the Torah or leading the congregation in prayer.

**5 LIFE CYCLE CEREMONIES.** Throughout the millennia, ritual ceremonies were developed to mark the passage of males from one life stage to another. Parallel rites of passage for females have been largely absent.

**6 LEARNING.** The Talmud explicitly exempted women from the mitzvah of Torah study, a daily obligation for male Jews, thus creating a large gap between men's and women's learning.

**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 recorded very few models.

Now let's look at the recent past. To understand the global picture, it's important to examine the issues one by one.

**1 LANGUAGE.** Within Orthodoxy, there is virtually no discussion of language; anyone who attempts to revise inherited texts is immediately suspect of betraying the community trust. Consequently, there has been no change, not a single sacred word. This is in sharp contrast to the liberal denominations where gender-inclusive, non-sexist prayer books, for example, are becoming the norm and not the radical exception.

Still, there are signs of awareness of the power that language holds. For example, I have heard reliable off-the-record reports of a few 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 the text, but they do it with sensitivity to the issue of derogating women.

Many Orthodox rabbis now take care in their sermons and teachings to use phrases such as "he or she," and "men and women." This is in contrast to past universal use of the male pronoun as the generic term for human beings and community, and it definitely reflects new perceptions of women. Since some rabbis who are unalterably opposed to changing hallowed language nonetheless make these changes in their everyday speech, perhaps changes in liturgical language lie ahead.

**2 LEGAL TESTIMONY.** As the law here is explicit—only men may qualify as witnesses—this issue also has not come under review.

Does this mean that women can in no way give testimony in a religious court? Actually, it does not. For example, Israeli rabbinic courts for some time now have taken women's testimony "through the back door." In other words, the court is technically disbanded, then 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. Currently there's an interesting development taking place in Israeli religious courts in relation to issues of family status. As of 1990, a woman who is party to a divorce proceeding has the option of bringing with her to the court an auxiliary person—a woman—to give

support and to speak on her behalf. Two eminent Orthodox rabbis are among those now training women in Israel to serve in this new capacity. This advocate is taught Talmudic family law, the rights of women under the law, and the appropriate ways of representing her charge.

Because of the fact that Conservative women rabbis have begun increasingly to serve in the formal capacity as witnesses in Jewish legal proceedings, I believe that at some point within the next decade the Orthodox rabbinate will have to deal more extensively with the formal issue of women as witnesses.

**3 DIVORCE.** During the past few decades, feminism has had a dual impact on the phenomenon of divorce in Western society. First, because of growing recognition that women deserve to have as much power over their personal lives as men do, any law (civil or religious) that harbors the potential for inequity is facing scrutiny. Second, there also has been a general rise in the rate of wife-initiated divorce.

In the Orthodox community, these trends play out interestingly. Since Jewish law dictates that the husband alone is empowered to give the *get*, a rise in wife-initiated divorce-action (note: this is different from actually giving the *get*) has also produced a rise in the numbers of recalcitrant husbands—that is, men who withhold the *get* for spite or blackmail. Simultaneously, there is greater community acceptance of the principle of equality in family law.

During the past 25 years, there have been six identifiable stages of response to this collision course. Developmentally, the community has moved from denial that a problem even exists; through apologetics ("Jewish divorce law is designed to protect women"); through hand-wringing (the rabbi saying, "It's a terrible problem, but what can I do?"); through attaching a *get* to civil divorce proceedings (a civil judge can incarcerate a recalcitrant husband until he complies); through using prenuptial agreements (in truth, not widely used) which effectively eliminate abuse; to the current stage—political activism. Organizations in the U.S. such as G.E.T. (Get Equal Treatment) and Agunah, and their counterparts in Israel, have raised the issue in the public eye. These groups use a variety of means: serving as intermediaries; organizing protests and sanctions against a recalcitrant husband;

and publicizing biased and unsavory acts of some religious courts. Less formal but quite effective is the activism that crops up in individual communities: a rabbi announcing from the pulpit that a man refuses to give his wife a *get*; a group of women rallying to support a friend by announcing in *shul* that none of them will go to the mikveh until she has her *get* in hand (inasmuch as *halakha* forbids resumption of sexual relations following menses until the wife immerses herself in the *mikveh*, this Lysistrata-style announcement produced immediate results); or, in the fundamentalist communities, the occasional use of physical force to help a man "decide" that he wants to give his wife a *get*. While more deserving of the term "thuggery" than activism, this latter method countervails the husband's own brand of thuggery.

Meanwhile, the grave problem of the *agunah* [woman unable to remarry because she does not have a *get*] remains. Currently, the problem is tackled on an individual basis, case by case. Caring *poskim* [religious decisors] try to find *halakhic* ways to invalidate the marriage so as to free the *agunah*. But what is now needed is to move on to the next stage: a comprehensive solution, at the level of the law, so that the potential for inequity will be eliminated and no woman will ever suffer humiliation and vulnerability at the hands of a recalcitrant husband.

**4 PRAYER.** What is the solution for Orthodox women who want to remain faithful to the tradition, but also experience fuller participation in communal prayer?—women's *tefila* [prayer] groups. These groups are deliberately not called women's *minyanim* (because *halakhically* women may not constitute a *minyan*), and prayers that require a *minyan* are conscientiously omitted. Rabbi Avi Weiss's defense of these groups (in his book, *Women at Prayer*) is predicated on this distinction. Still, despite all this care, detractors of all-female groups insist on calling them "women's *minyanim*."

Generally, women's *tefila* groups meet once a month—the rationale being that women want fuller expression in prayer (such as leading services, offering *divrei Torah* [Torah teachings] or sermons, cantillating from the Torah, receiving *aliyot* [getting called to the Torah to recite a blessing], celebrating meaningful passages in their lives), but

do not want to split off into separate his/her prayer communities. Women's *tefila* groups, then, are specifically a sub-community—not a break from the larger community. Although these groups exhibit none of the liturgical creativity of women's prayer groups of liberal denominations, still, their sheer existence is in itself abundantly innovative.

It must be acknowledged that women's *tefila* groups have not attracted overwhelming numbers of participants, but they are a steady force, and growing. Given the unfriendly reception they've received from traditionalists in the wider Orthodox community, this is no small feat. Several years ago, five well-known Orthodox rabbis produced a mean-spirited statement accusing women's *tefila* groups ("women's *minyanim*," in their words) of being solely radical feminist political clubs—not liturgical enterprises in the service of God. It was extraordinarily heavy censure, stopping just short of a ban. Amazingly, not only did none of the prayer groups fold under the pressure (ten years ago, they would have!), but the heavy-handedness of the criticism actually created new feminists.

In Israel, the group called Women of the Wall, which asserts the right of women to pray as a group at the sacred Western Wall, has had to handle not only censure and intimidation, but physical violence as well. After having stones and chairs thrown at them, the group has taken its case to the Israeli civil courts—an unusual place to solve *halakhic* dilemmas—and is now awaiting decision.

Another new phenomenon is that of women convening themselves as a *mezuman* (quorum of three or more) to recite grace after a meal. Though *halakhic* precedent for this does exist, custom interdicts such behavior. I remember, for example, attending a pageant prepared by the all-female students in my daughter's eleventh-grade yeshiva class. After the pageant there was a luncheon, at the close of which the principal brought in (from another part of the building) three eighth-grade boys to constitute the quorum for reciting grace. For me, the asymmetry was startling, though when I delicately raised the issue with several friends, I immediately saw the veils drop over their eyes. Recently, however, beginning self-consciously but by now matter-of-factly, groups of women have been convening their own *mezumanim*. For Amit and Emunah women (the two strongest Orthodox

women's organizations) this has become a fairly standard procedure.

Some Orthodox women have also begun reciting *kiddush*, the prayer over wine. Although the Talmud permits this, it also manages to comment parenthetically that a curse will befall any man whose wife does so. In the past, a woman reciting the *kiddush* conveyed the message that there was no man or boy in her life to fulfill this *mitzvah* for her. Though today the practice still raises eyebrows in some quarters, it is no longer considered piteous, scandalous or antinomian. At a family celebration, bat mitzvah, birth ceremony or congregational *kiddush*, Orthodox women—though not in great numbers—recite *kiddush*.

Women are also beginning other liturgical practices. For example, an occasional woman will hold aloft her own *lulav* and *etrog* in synagogue on the festival of Sukkot. Historically, women *bentsched* [blessed] *lulav* in the privacy of their homes, and only men performed this ritual in communal prayer. Women's



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Simchat Torah *hakafot* [rounds of carrying and dancing with the Torah scroll] exist in a number of modern Orthodox synagogues, though they generally take place outside of the sanctuary (often in the street outside the shul) with relatively few women joining in. In the home of a young Orthodox family I know, it is the learned wife who recites *havdalah*; the couple studied the sources and concluded that just as the woman must usher in the Sabbath with the lighting of candles, so she may usher it out.

## 5 LIFE-CYCLE CEREMONIES.

**Birth.** After almost four millennia, birth ceremonies for baby girls have begun to be woven into the fabric of Jewish life. They are generally celebrated at home (though large gatherings have moved, like the *bris*, to a synagogue or social hall); they usually take place within the second or third month after birth. Not yet standardized or formalized by rabbinic

Traditionally, a baby girl was "named" in the synagogue, during the first week of life, not during the central communal Torah reading of Shabbat morning, but rather at a Monday or Thursday *shakharit* [morning] or Shabbat *minkha* [afternoon] Torah reading—when there was a much smaller community presence. Today, in many modern Orthodox *shuls*, baby girls are now often named at the central liturgical moment of Torah reading—on Shabbat morning immediately preceding *musaf* [additional Sabbath and holiday prayer].

A Jewish name is traditionally composed of a Hebrew name plus the given Hebrew name of the father (the latter becomes the child's surname). For example, Benjy Weiss's Jewish name is *Binyamin ben* (son of) *Avraham*. His sister is *Dinah bat* (daughter of) *Avraham*. In very special circumstances (such as during the prayer for healing), the mother's name is used: *Binyamin ben Sarah* or *Dinah bat Sarah*. Otherwise,

however, only the father's name is used.

During this last decade, this practice has changed. At baby namings in *shul* or at birth ceremonies (even at an occasional *bris*), both parents names are used as surnames. Women called up to the Torah in women's

*tefila* groups also use both parents' names. I have not yet heard of a bat 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.

There is a custom of blessing a baby boy at his *bris* with, "May he grow to [a life of] Torah, the wedding canopy, and good deeds." For a baby girl, the traditional blessing leaves out the "Torah" part. Again, during this last decade there has been a change, and today most Orthodox Jews bless male and female babies identically—a promising indicator of changing community expectations.

**Bat Mitzvah.** The celebration of bat-mitzvah—relatively new to Orthodoxy—takes many different forms, though none of these includes a girl's taking a formal role in the standard community Sabbath service. The range includes: a *kiddush* in her family's home at which she delivers a *dvar Torah*; a *siyyum* [festive meal celebrating the completion of a tractate of Talmud] marking the end of her year-long study of a tractate of Mishnah; her father's being called up for an *aliyah* or chanting the Torah portion; the rabbi of the congregation addressing her at Sabbath morning services as she stands in her place; and her presenting a *dvar Torah* to the congregation gathered in *shul* for *shaleshudos* [or *seudah shlishit*, the third Sabbath meal, eaten between the afternoon and evening prayers].

But it is in the women's *tefila* groups that the celebration of bat mitzvah has truly expanded. Here a bat mitzvah might do everything a boy traditionally does: read her portion of the Torah and the *haftorah* [writings of the prophets] deliver a *dvar Torah*, and/or lead the prayers. At a recent celebration that I attended, the girl's mother led *shakharit* [morning prayers], a friend read the *haftorah*, and the bat mitzvah herself read from the Torah, delivered a *dvar Torah*, and led the *musaf* [additional prayers]. After the prayer of *aleinu*, a dozen little girls came up to the *bimah* [podium] to lead the concluding prayers. All this was followed by a luncheon in the girl's honor.

During the first half of the dozen years of existence of the Riverdale, New York, Women's *Tefila* group, the number of 12-year-old girls who celebrated bat mitzvah could be counted on one hand. But during the last four years, there have been a handful each year. In 1992-93 (the Riverdale group's own bat mitzvah year), eight girls thus far have reserved their bat mitzvah Sabbaths. 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 recent. The first was a *Tu B'Shvat* seder. The young girl had spent a year with a tutor studying everything in the Talmud and Midrash regarding the trees and fruits of Israel. She and her family then compiled a *Tu B'Shvat haggadah* which she taught to the guests. A festive meal of foods and fruits of the holy land completed the



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authorities, these *simkhat bat* (the rejoicing of the daughter) ceremonies are the creation of individual families all over the country. But they all have in common a central theme—the entry of a baby girl into the covenant between God and the Jewish people. By now, many such ceremonies 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 publish one such birth ceremony in a new *siddur*. A hundred years from now, few will know whether this ceremony came "from Sinai" or not.

read a single verse after the two women finished their teaching, so as to give the appearance that the women's teaching was "extra," rather than fundamental; *kaddish* was then recited.



**LEARNING.** In Orthodoxy, feminism has most powerfully taken root in the study of sacred texts. There is a virtual explosion of women's learning in both the modern and ultra-Orthodox communities alike. When I was growing up—in a home in which primary emphasis was placed on Jewish education—I was never introduced directly to a page of Talmud. Today, however, young women are taught Talmud at the same early age as their brothers. Women fill honors Talmud classes in high schools (such as Ramaz in New York City), and a fair number of higher institutions of traditional learning have been created specifically for women (such as Drisha in New York, and Matan, Machon Lindenbaum, and Nishmat in Israel). Yeshiva University's Revel Graduate School and Stern College have offered Talmud study for women as far back as the 1960's.

Although Talmud study, throughout most of Jewish history, was out of bounds for women, it is now well, if not yet widely, accepted. In local communities, women manage to carve out time for regular study of Torah, Talmud and other texts. A once uncommon sight is now taken almost for granted: women walking through the streets on a Shabbat afternoon (in communities where there is an *eruv*—a boundary marker allowing Orthodox Jews to carry on the Sabbath) with a volume of Mishnah or Talmud tucked under their arms.

As the pool of women who learn enlarges, so, too, does the number of women who become teachers of Talmud and *halakha*. Remarkably, there are now a dozen or so Orthodox women around the world who have spent the last decade concentrating on advanced Talmud studies. And there are dozens more coming up through the pipelines.



**LEADERSHIP.** A discussion about learning brings us round to the subject of leadership, because the two topics are inextricably linked in Orthodoxy. It seems not at all unreasonable to make the following



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prediction: in the not-too-distant future, women in the Orthodox community will hold the title of rabbi. The meshing of two forces—on the one hand, the explosion of women's learning in Orthodoxy, and on the other, the very powerful model of women rabbis in liberal denominations—is surely going to create this effect.

I doubt that at the outset Orthodox women will serve as pulpit rabbis (the community probably won't be ready for that), but women will be ordained based on their mastery of texts. I believe we will witness this in our time because we are charted along an irreversible course: women, in significant numbers, are becoming proficient in all that qualifies a person for ordination.

Meanwhile we should note that many women have assumed lay leadership roles, now serving as officers of Orthodox synagogues, up to and including presidents—a leap from our status a generation ago when we could not even vote as members of Orthodox shuls.

Currently several women serve as executive directors of Orthodox synagogues. Some women who sit on rabbinic search committees use the opportunity to query candidates on their views of women's issues. Women serve as chairpersons and as guests of honor at yeshiva dinners. The all-male dais can now be found only in the most religiously right-wing world.

To a non-Orthodox reader, this might all seem totally inconsequential, or worse, laughable. So what if women recite a bit of Torah in public? So what if a girl stands in the women's section and the rabbi recognizes her on her bat mitzvah day? What is so remarkable about the fact that a Jewish child finally carries both mother's and father's name? Moreover, some examples I cited are nothing more than one-time episodes. These are "significant changes in Orthodoxy?"

Let me explain why I believe these changes are highly significant, indeed, nothing short of revolutionary. Though when taken item by item none is earth shaking, when measured together they add up to the redefinition of women's role in the liturgical, spiritual, and intellectual life of the community. This represents a fundamental shift from the classic assumption that women's basic dignity and religious expression is in the home.

That is why I call the impact of feminism upon Orthodoxy a "revolution of small signs." All these small steps reflect new spiritual expectations of and by Orthodox women. Each act proclaims the growing acceptance of women in public roles in Jewish life. The presumption today is that women will locate themselves in academy and synagogue, as well as in home and *mikveh*. Slowly but surely, a female presence in sacred settings is becoming normal, natural, familiar, everyday. The taboos against seeing and hearing women perform communal acts of holiness are steadily being lifted.

Another reason these small signs 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 in others. One might hear, "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 Y if we may introduce that at our wedding."

The power of a model far exceeds impassioned argument. You can have a thousand discussions on what women may or may not do, but with one real

unusual learning experience.

On Purim of 5751 (1991), another first in Orthodox Jewish history occurred. A bat mitzvah read the Purim *megillah* for the entire congregation in the main sanctuary. According to the tradition, the *megillah* reading is the one Torah reading for which a woman reader may fulfill not only her own obligation to hear the text read, but a male's too. 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 by Orthodox rabbis, among them her uncle and grandfather. The liturgical feast was followed by a culinary one. I participated with great joy, and thought about the wonderful memories that she will carry with her for the rest of her life. What a contrast to the Orthodox women of my generation. We can each recall our sweet-sixteen party, but not the day of our bat mitzvah.

**Marriage.** In the traditional Jewish wedding, the bride's role is a silent one, and women guests receive no participatory honors. A bride is veiled by her husband [*bedeken*]; she walks seven times around him under the wedding canopy (a tradition that I maintain is not sexist—but this explanation belongs to a longer essay); she hears the marriage declaration and accepts the ring on her index finger; and she acquires the *ketubah* [marriage contract].

I am sure that brides of the past did not feel slighted by their minimal roles—like brides everywhere, they felt themselves to be the center of the universe. Nowadays, though, some brides want more active roles for themselves and for their female friends and relatives. Here are a few new customs:

- Just before the *bedeken* [veiling], the bride's father, followed by the bride's father-in-law, places his hands over the *kallah's* [bride's] head and blesses her. I've always found this a very poignant moment, so I find it touching that some mothers are beginning to perform this rite, too.

- Women, as well as men, hold up the poles of the *huppah* [marriage canopy].

- A female guest reads the *ketubah* during the ceremony. Some rabbis will allow a woman to read only the English translation; others allow women to read the original Aramaic as well.

- Under the *huppah* the bride recites some words of love, usually taken from

the Song of Songs, or gives the groom a ring; traditionally, only the groom gives a ring. These acts, initiated by the bride, may be done only after the marriage ceremony has technically 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"). So as to make clear that these acts are not part of the formal ritual, they are often done after the reading of the *ketubah* or at the conclusion of the ceremony. Those Orthodox rabbis who do permit brides to participate in these ways often take care to point out what is tradition and what is not.

- At a recent Orthodox wedding, right before the breaking of the glass, seven women were serially called up to the *huppah* to recite words of blessing corresponding to the *sheva berakhot*, the seven traditional wedding blessings that, moments earlier, were recited by seven male guests.

- The *kallah's tish* [bride's table] 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 recites words of Torah. At the first *kallah's tish* that I attended several years ago, the *d'var Torah* was delivered by the bride's sister, a teacher of Talmud.

**Death.** An obvious area of change involves the *kaddish*. Recited daily by men at communal prayers during the eleven months following the death of a parent (or thirty days for other members of the immediate family) the *kaddish* is a powerful healing ritual which helps a mourner move through grief in the framework of a loving community. A few Orthodox women (in contrast to many in the liberal denominations) have taken upon themselves the recitation of the daily *kaddish*. Their experiences usually run something like this: during the first few days, the regulars (i.e. men) of an Orthodox *minyan* are somewhat uncomfortable as the woman appears, and everyone shifts around a bit uneasily. Since the weekday services are usually 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 *mehitza* [partition separating men and women]. Therefore, for the first few mornings, the woman usually recites prayers and *kaddish* from the hall. Within a very few days, a *mehitza* is set up for

her, so that she need not remain out in the hall. Little by little, she becomes part of the group of regular "*minyanares*," though services will never begin until 10 men have assembled.



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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 graciously. 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's offering a *d'var Torah* at a *shiva minyan*. *Shiva* is the seven-day mourning ritual following burial, during which time mourners sit on low wooden stools in their homes, and are visited by family and friends who comfort, distract, listen, bring food, and pray with them.

At one particular *shiva minyan* not long ago, the granddaughter and granddaughter-in-law of the deceased taught Mishnah between the afternoon and evening prayers and related its verses to the life of their grandfather. The custom is to recite an additional *kaddish* after this Mishnah reading. However, since this was more than the women's father/father-in-law could handle, a compromise was reached. A male guest

case that has passed *halakhic* muster, the arguments are not even engaged.

Of course, it is a far slower process, these small signs. Is there anything to be said in its favor?

I believe so. If you take incremental steps, as opposed to giant ones, you feel more joined to the tradition, more continuous with it, still tied to Revelation. A sense of continuity is more than legal, it is also psychological. When there is organic change, it is experienced not as a novelty, not as opposing what came before, but rather as flowing forward smoothly throughout time, history, and community. This sense of connectedness is one of the great strengths of Orthodoxy.

Second, the cautious response of Orthodoxy enables us to monitor a broader societal issue. All of the answers about role distinctiveness are not yet in. Perhaps there is room for gender specific roles beyond biology. How do we know that a rapid blurring of all the lines might not be a blueprint for great confusion ahead? A (de facto) feminist definition of equality-as-sameness may not necessarily be most fitting to the human condition. To be sure, the very broad differences in gender roles (e.g. learning and leadership for men; family and home for women) which have limited Orthodox women certainly will have to go. Much has already fallen away. But that doesn't preclude some specific, well-defined roles and rituals for each gender.

Why ritual? Because once you acknowledge that there is value to gender-specific roles, once you affirm that it is possible to hold in harmony equality and gender distinctiveness, then finely detailed ritual is the way to do it: ultimately, it is ritual that has the capacity to take differences beyond the immediacy of interpersonal relationships to a transcendent place.

Having said that I must say the other, lest anyone confuse my defense of a measured response or justification of ritual distinctiveness with legitimization of freezing the status quo. We still have a long way to go in Orthodoxy. 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; at the very least, a moratorium on suspicion and scorn. The formalization of rituals that affirm women and covenant; religious expression for experiences that are uniquely female; broader realizations

of women's aspirations to religious leadership—all of these still lie ahead.

Given that reality, why write in so sanguine a manner about the small signs? Is it not premature? I know the facts. Only yesterday was my reverie shattered in a conversation with one of the dozen women I referred to above as future Talmud scholars. After ten years of intensive Talmud study, she is switching fields. She spoke of "an uphill battle for acceptance and legitimacy in the world of Yeshiva learning...a professional dead end." Standing on the corner listening to her, I couldn't help but think that with all that 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. For those who fear that change will destroy the whole system, a look at the new realities can only help to dispel their panic. Orthodoxy is flourishing, not diminishing, with the greater spiritual energy and intellect of women.

Moreover, an honest assessment of 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 *halakha* and its authority. *Halakha* remains as 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.

Third, it is vital to respond to those who say no to feminist change on the grounds that it destroys the family. True, feminism has contributed somewhat to the erosion of the traditional family. But women's fuller participation in ritual and prayer, deeper immersion in the teachings of the Rabbis, and, yes, pressure for equality in divorce law to restore glory to a just religion—all of these heighten commitment and identity, which in turn strengthen the family.

Besides, the larger picture is this: equality in status, ritual, and role generates a sense of equality in a marriage; that, and not hierarchy, is what contributes to a healthy, stable family in our times.

Which brings me to my last point. How will feminism in Orthodoxy move ahead? I believe that depends largely on the wishes of Orthodox women. Currently, most of us want only to preserve the status quo. That is why

change has come so slowly, why rabbinic leaders have not felt impelled to use their powers of interpretation.

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 while maintaining the integrity of the faith system.

As feminism increasingly affects women in the Orthodox community, the process will inexorably move forward. *Halakha* will again open itself to interpretation, and we will see within it a definition of equality, as well as of distinctiveness of male and female, that will carry us faithfully forward into the next four thousand years of Jewish life.

*Blu Greenberg is the author of A Special Kind of Mother (Atara Publishing, 1992) and is currently editing a book on mikveh. This article will be adapted for her forthcoming book, Jewish Women: A Time of Transition (Jewish Publication Society, 1993).*

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