

*"Divisions between  
Tradition and  
Liberalism in the  
American Jewish  
Community"*

## **The Feminist Revolution in Orthodox Judaism in America**

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**N**O MATTER WHERE one stands on the issue, there is no disputing the facts: fundamental changes in women's roles in Judaism have taken place during these past few decades. And those who applaud these changes as well as those who decry them would agree that the driving force has been secular feminism. The antagonist, of course, would maintain that feminism is a contaminating foreign body, alien to Judaism, and therefore not usable or allowable. The protagonist would insist that feminism is a Utopian vision embedded in the earliest sacred sources of Judaism: "...male and female created [as equals] in the image of God" (Genesis 1:27). Not only does this new theology of women not run counter to Judaism, the latter would insist, but it is an authentic hermeneutic by which to chart the course for the future.

Now this is no small matter in a religion so heavily oriented to the use of the hermeneutic. Judaism is a system of Revelation, overlaid with tradition and culture. Incredibly vast sources have grown up around the revealed word of God. The basic process, and the means by which all of this is carried forward, made accessible, and continuously connected to our lives is this use of the hermeneutic in interpreting the sources. In other words, to effect change, yet be consistent and continuous with tradition, a valid interpretive key must be found. For many modern Jews, and for their denominational institutions, this new key is feminism—the fundamental statement of equality of the sexes.



But wait! Why the need here for a new hermeneutic, or, more appropriately, a newly resurrected old hermeneutic? The answer grows largely out of a

disparity between feminism and Judaism in their respective presumptions about women and men.

Feminism presumes women to be equal to men in their potential abilities, to be entitled to equal access in all areas of life, and to be able to achieve and wield power in arenas heretofore closed to them.

Jewish tradition never flatly declared women to be unequal, but as the law was expounded through time and history, it assigned different roles and responsibilities to men and women; and some of these placed women in hierarchical relationship to men.

It must be said, however, that on balance, women were treated with considerable benevolence and respect in Jewish tradition. This is a fact, independent of apologetics and quite apart from the "women-on-a-pedestal" theory. One must refute those who unjustly accuse the Rabbis of being singularly bent on subjugating women to men's will or whim. On the contrary, given the extraordinary powers of interpretation men hold in a patriarchal system, there was a relative absence of abuse as the law continued to expand and deepen over the long course of Jewish history.

Still, in certain areas of Jewish life, hierarchy did exist. And continues to do so. While it largely manifested itself in matters of access and responsibility, in some few areas the potential for outright discrimination was built directly into the law. For example, in Jewish divorce proceedings, there is great room for a man's mischief. Moreover, while I have drawn the distinction between access and discrimination, I do so largely for the purpose of assigning urgency to remedy. One can also interpret limited access and lesser responsibility—participation in communal liturgies, study of Torah, arbiters in courts of law, equal celebrants in life cycle ritual—as forms of discrimination. Or, to look at it yet another way, because of the domino effect of one thing upon the other, perhaps every aspect of imbalance constitutes a form of discrimination. I hesitate to use the word "abuse" here because a) most orthodox women, including myself, do not "feel abused" by the lack of, say, equal participation in communal prayer, and b) exempting women from certain public roles was not intended, I believe, as abuse.



Which brings us to the next issue, the painful question of "why?" This is a difficult question for one who loves Judaism and believes that it holds the greater

truths. If feminism is a higher order definition—and any thinking person would have to acknowledge a definition of equality to be of higher order than one of hierarchy—then why should a religion as ethical and sensitive to human concerns as Judaism have allowed hierarchy and inequity to be built into its basic structures?

One answer is that hierarchy was the social truth of all pre-feminist societies. Just as in any living religious system sociology tends to be codified into canon law, so hierarchy became part of *halakha* (Jewish law) and therefore resistant to change.

A second reason is that the Rabbis, reflecting community design and expectation, perceived women to be primarily involved in the open-ended tasks of family life. Thus, they exempted women from roles that would pose conflicts in time and energy or that would pull them away from their primary responsibilities.

Third, there was a lopsided view of modesty, with women expected to be "inside persons," i.e., minimally inhabiting public roles.

Fourth, hierarchy could be interpreted in theological terms: women are to men as men are to God.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, some outright misogynist statements do exist in the sources, such as women being incapable of sustained ritual performance because of their light-mindedness. Though such statements are relatively few in number, they must be acknowledged.

Thus, while the first and second reasons seem to me to be most accurate and authentic, one can find a variety of reasons that run through the traditional sources.



Now, fast forward to the 20th century, to the 60s and 70s and the flowering of feminism within Judaism. All along the religious and denominational spectrum, women fill many new roles. This is most evident in the liberal denominations. For example, from no religious leadership at all (a handful of isolated exceptions during the past two millennia) to the ordination of women in Reform Judaism in 1972, Reconstructionism in 1974, and Conservative Judaism in 1983. These are not exceptions to the rule. They are now the norm. During the last decade, Hebrew Union College (Reform) has ordained an equal number of men and women as rabbis.

Similarly, counting women as part of a *minyan*, calling them up to the Torah, creating gender inclusive liturgies and interpretations of texts, eliminating inequity in Jewish divorce law—it all looks very different from the previous 2000 years. The new hermeneutic of women's equality is working. It has led to a fundamental reevaluation of inherited roles for women. In fact, it almost seems as if Jewish feminism in the liberal denominations has filled most of its agenda and may soon be able to self-destruct.

But what about Orthodoxy? It is to this topic that I wish to address myself. Contrary to the stereotypical view of Orthodoxy that nothing ever changes; contrary to the fact that here feminism does not carry the weight of hermeneutic by which to reinterpret *halakha*, and contrary to the recent and hefty pull of Orthodoxy to the right—much has happened during the last two decades. I hope that I will be able to surprise you with some of the new advances, because I find them surprising myself and a source of hope as well.



Before doing that, I shall briefly summarize seven areas that call for attention—and repair:

1. **Language.** By and large, language of Scriptures and liturgy is non-inclusive. God and community are referred to in the male pronoun, God is the God of our fathers; some parts of the Torah are addressed to "...you and your wife (wives)..."

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

3. **Family law.** In divorce cases, Jewish law prescribes that the man issues the writ of divorce [the *get*] to the woman and not vice versa. There are many instances where a man withholds this writ, for reasons of spite or blackmail, from a woman who initiates divorce action.

4. **Prayer.** In the communal liturgy, the *minyan*, women's presence was neither required nor counted. Consequently, they did not participate in the more public liturgical honors such as being called up to the Torah or leading the congregation in prayer.

5. **Life-cycle ceremonies.** By and large, through several thousand years of tradition, ceremonies were developed to mark the entry or growth of males from

one stage to another. Parallel celebrations or *rites de passage* for females did not evolve through the centuries.

6. **Learning.** In the Talmud, women were explicitly not included in the *mitzvah* (commandment/opportunity) of study of 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.



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

What has happened during the last twenty years? To understand the global picture, we must examine the issue item by item.

1) **Language.** In contrast to the liberal denominations, where language-inclusive (non-sexist) prayer books are becoming the norm and not the radical exception, in Orthodoxy there is not only no change, but hardly any discussion of the issue.

When it comes to changing ancient texts, I must admit to a measure of ambivalence myself. Recently, 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 *chavurah*-type (small, informal) *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-meditated—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 should be so casually altered. Others felt that it was about time, in fact,

long overdue — Reform had done it a dozen years earlier and the skies had not fallen in. — But you can't 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. The Law Committee turned right around and handed 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 that very week 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 bit 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 the increased widening of the breach between Conservative and Orthodox movements.

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

However, as we shall shortly see, where there is a flowering of new prayer, women's personas and past models are often incorporated. Moreover, I have become keenly aware that many Orthodox rabbis, in their sermons and teachings, are careful to use phrases such as "he or she," and "men and women." This is in sharp contrast to previous 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 most powerful arguments for changing language, i.e., that language and its images inform the psyche in a subtle, subconscious, and therefore most powerful way. If 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) **Court of Law.** The law is explicit: only men qualify as witnesses. Consequently, here, too, there has been no discussion in the community. The fact that the 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.

Does this mean that no women 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. Technically, the court is disbanded, the testimony of a woman is taken, and then the court is formally reconvened. Those who deliberate on the issue may use the information supplied by the woman.

In addition, a most interesting phenomenon is now taking place in Israel, where issues of family status come under the jurisdiction of religious courts. As of 1990, a woman who is party to a divorce proceeding may now bring with her an auxiliary person to give her support and to speak and argue on her behalf. Heretofore, a woman in this capacity was not admitted to religious court proceedings.

Because of the domino effect of one area on the other, it seems likely that at some time in the future, the Orthodox rabbinate will have to deal more extensively with this issue.

3) **Family Law.** Feminism has had a bifurcated impact on divorce during the last two decades. On the one hand, there is growing acknowledgement of the fact that women should have no less power over their personal lives and decisions than men have, and any law that creates the potential for imbalance should be revamped. The second impact of feminism has been to accelerate the rate of female-initiated divorce—including in the Orthodox community where it gives rise to a greater number of recalcitrant husbands. As these two forces interface with each other, Jewish divorce law comes under increased scrutiny, and rightly so.

It seems possible to identify seven stages of response during the past twenty years:

The first stage was one of total denial and unresponsiveness, denial that a problem existed and unresponsiveness to those who identified the problem and offered solutions. And it must be said that to their abiding credit, there were those who, more than two decades ago, tried to solve the problems of the *agunah*, the woman anchored to an absentee husband who withheld the *get*. Scholars such as Rabbis Eliezer Beikowitz, Emanuel Rackman, and Ze'ev Falk searched through *halakha* and wrote treatises on internal methods to prevent or protect an *agunah*, but their ideas were simply shot down in the *halakhic* community. No counter-measures were offered by the rabbinic leadership, and no support was forthcoming from a concerned laity.

The second stage might be called the apologetic stage. Many rabbinic leaders began to engage the issue, arguing that contrary to the perception of feminists, Jewish divorce law was designed to protect women. While some might snicker at this 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 of those times in which the irrevocable divorce law was the law of the land. If a wife exceedingly angered her husband, he would walk to the door and, holding it open, would summarily summon his wife to walk out as he pronounced aloud three times the divorce formula. Without even collecting her belongings, she was required to walk through the door and never return. A woman had to walk around pretty gingerly in that kind of a society. In contrast, Jewish divorce law required the writing of the *get* and its delivery to her in her hands. At the very least, it 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, one could easily spot 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 positive philosophical orientation of the law. Thus, the emendation of this *halakha* can be understood as working towards its own best values.

The third stage, which, for want of a better term, I refer to as the hand-wringing stage, made considerable progress over denial and apologetics. Now, the human problem began to be dealt with by those other than the victims. What is the

hand-wringing stage? When a rabbi says, "It is a problem, an awful problem. I feel great sympathy. But that's *halakha*; that's it; what can I do?"

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 legally based on those aspects of a Jewish marriage that are contractual in nature. However, it is easy to see the many problems raised by this type of solution, in particular the issue of separation of church and state.

The fifth stage was that of the prenuptial agreement. A Jewish prenuptial agreement is one in which the parties agree that if they should ever separate or seek a civil divorce, and one or the other impedes the *get*, then they will submit themselves to the authority of a rabbinic court which may mandate a husband to give his wife a *get*.

I must acknowledge that 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 this prenuptial agreement.

Stage six, which is where we are now, is witnessing the growth of activism in the Orthodox community. There are two types of activist organizations: one that tries to achieve its goals by acting as intermediary, exerting mild pressure, using social work techniques; the other uses protests, sanctions, and publicity, and monitors the religious courts. In addition, there are several other *ad hoc* groupings of activism. For example, in my community lives a man who has been unreasonably withholding the *get* from his wife. Recently, each of the rabbis in the community announced from the pulpit that this man would not be welcome in any of their synagogues until he gave his wife a *get*. When it became known that the rabbi of my own 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* (Orthodox synagogue) that evening. As the rabbi stood to speak, the women rose in unison as a symbol of support for the public stand the rabbi was taking. Can anyone imagine that this would have happened a decade ago? Surely, I cannot.

The other example of an *ad hoc* group is that of a number of Canadian women who decided to take matters into their own hands. A friend was being

blackmailed by her husband in return for the *get*. The woman came from a wealthy family. Her parents wanted to pay so as to release her but she didn't 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 *mikveh* until their friend had her *get* in hand. Those of you who are smiling are aware that, according to *halakha*, husbands and wives do not resume sexual relations following menses until the wife immerses herself in the *mikveh*, the ritual bath. I should report here that this was the fastest divorce ever delivered in Jewish history. Levity aside, women in the community are beginning to understand that they, too, have levers of power.

Meanwhile, the problem of the *agunah* remains. I believe, however, that we are at the verge of a solution. If all of this could have transpired in twenty years, then surely a more comprehensive solution is near at hand. Currently, the problem is solved on a retail basis, one anchored woman by one anchored woman. What we need is a wholesale solution, a solution at the level of the law so that the potential for inequity will be forever and totally eliminated.

**4. Prayer.** 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 assembly a women's *minyan*? Because as *halakha*-abiding Jews they know that women may not constitute a *minyan*. Thus, they omit the recitation of certain prayers that require a *minyan*.

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 prayer communities. (I suspect also, given the time and effort it takes to "run" a standing weekly Sabbath service, it just might be more than a small informal group can handle.) So it remains a subcommunity for women within their larger communities and not a break from them. Celebration of life-cycle ceremonies and special events in women's lives, the experience of leading the services, offering a *d'var Torah* or sermon, reading from the Torah with proper cantillations, calling women up for *ahiyot* (reciting blessings over the reading of the Torah), reciting special blessings of thanksgiving—these are the components of women's *tefila*. On the one hand, there is none of the liturgical innovation 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.

It must be acknowledged that the 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 in the wider Orthodox community. Several years ago, five well-respected and highly placed Orthodox rabbis produced a rather mean-spirited statement criticizing the women's *tefila* groups, accusing them of being nothing more than radical feminist political clubs and not liturgical enterprises in the name of God. It was extraordinarily heavy pressure and censure, and it stopped just short of forbidding these gatherings. What was amazing to me, and quite heartening, was that none of the prayer groups folded under such pressure. Ten years ago, that would not have happened. I would even go so far as to say that the heavy-handedness of these establishment rabbinic figures made 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 within the context of *halakha* prayer. And 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, just as feminists in America did after trying other avenues. As has been the case at many other times in Jewish history, politics and *halakha* are now intertwined.

Much else is happening, phenomenon that simply are new to the Orthodox way of life.

Item: Ritual objects and women. When I was growing up, I never witnessed a woman carrying a *lulav* (the palm branch) and *etrog* (the citron) to the synagogue, to hold it aloft at appropriate moments of prayer. During the last few years, I have observed an occasional woman here or there doing exactly that. In the last few years, one sees women taking up religious symbols that were not historically associated with them, such as women walking through the streets on Shabbat afternoon with a tractate of Mishnah or Talmud tucked under the arm as they make their way to a class. This is a relatively new sight.

Item: Women convening themselves as a quorum for grace after a meal. Tradition holds that women could not be counted in the *mezuman*, the quorum convened for a recitation of the grace. (Women were obligated to recite the grace but as individuals and not as members of a community.) However, there are *halakhic* precedents for three or more women to constitute themselves as a *mezuman* when no men are present. For most of this century, and probably for the better part of Jewish history, women did not do so. I recall attending several years ago a beautiful pageant prepared by the students in my daughter's class at a local *yeshiva* high school. I remember Deborah's own project well. It was to comb the biblical sources on water and its significance, and to relate water as a source of life to Torah as a source of life. In addition to her recitation, she created a huge felt display-panel of water and other symbols, and in twelve inch felt letters at the bottom were the Hebrew words from Isaiah, "Go to the waters." Although she was then only fifteen, her project—oral and visual—was a masterpiece. And so were the presentations of several of her other classmates. The high school at that time consisted of some two hundred young women and a learned faculty that was primarily female. The program was concluded with a lovely feast. After being nurtured for two hours by the gifts of intellect and heart of these young women, at the conclusion of the meal the principal called in from another part of the building three boys from the eighth grade who had already been *bar mitzva* so that they could constitute the quorum for reciting the grace. Somehow, the asymmetry of whose maturity counted was startling. The other thing that was startling was that no one seemed to notice the asymmetry. When I gently raised the issue afterwards with several of my friends, I immediately saw the "Oh, here she goes again" veil drop over their faces. But recently, at first self-consciously and then quite matter-of-factly, groups of women have begun to convene their own mini-congregations for recitation of the grace.

Item: Women and *kiddush*, the sanctification over the wine. The Talmud permits this. It adds, however, that a curse will befall a man whose wife recites the *kiddush* for him. Perhaps that explains why women rarely recited the *kiddush*. For a woman to do so heightened the fact that she had no man or boy in her life who could fulfill this *mitzva* for her. But today, there is no stigma. While not yet the norm, 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 a family celebration, *bat*

*mitzva*, birth ceremony, or congregational *kiddush*, women now recite the *kiddush*. To be sure, in some quarters it still raises eyebrows, but no one is tarred and feathered and run out of town. It is on the way to becoming more widely accepted.

5. Life cycle ceremonies. In Judaism, birth, marriage, and death are marked by important rituals.

Birth. One of the most beautiful and powerful rituals in Judaism is the rite of circumcision (*brit*). More than a medical procedure, it is a covenantal act. What it really means is that this eight-day-old baby boy is not just the baby of these two sweet young parents but in reality is the child of all of us. That is what a *brit* celebration is—this is the child 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.").

Since the time of Abraham, this tradition applied to boys only. Were girls also members of the covenantal community? Certainly they were, they are, but they entered without ceremony.

Item: After almost four thousand years *sans*, there are now birth ceremonies for baby girls. Not yet formalized or standardized, nor established by the rabbinic authorities, they are the creations of individual families all over the country. I suspect the way it will become a fixed part of Jewish tradition is this: an enterprising publisher of Jewish prayer books will select one such birth ceremony for a girl (*simcha bat*) and insert it into the new *siddur* (prayer book). In a hundred years from now, no one will know whether it came from Sinai or whether it is only forty or sixty years old; and in fact it will not matter.

Item: Naming a child in the synagogue. Although the tradition established no formal covenantal ceremony for the birth of baby girls, it did institute the custom of naming them in *shul* at the time of Torah reading. For reasons which are unexplained, this naming did not, for the most part, take place at the central communal Torah reading—on Shabbat morning—but rather at a Monday or Thursday *shacharit* (morning) or Shabbat *mincha* (afternoon) Torah reading, with a much smaller community presence. That, too, is changing. Baby girls are now often named at the central liturgical moment of Torah reading on Shabbat, just before the Sabbath *musaf* (additional) prayers.

Item: Giving the child a name. From earliest times, from the very first sojourn in Egypt, no matter what culture or country, no matter the conditions of

their lives, Jews marked their identity by giving and holding fast to their Jewish names. Traditionally, a Jewish name meant the given Hebrew name and 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 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 at all other times, only the father's name was used. But during this last decade, at several *brit* and *simchat bat* ceremonies I have attended, both parents' names were added to the given name, such 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 a *bar mitzvah* boy called up to the Torah for his first *aliyah* with his mother's name included, but I suspect that it is not far off.

Item: The infant-greeting formula. In addition to naming the baby girl in the presence of the whole congregation, the traditional words of greeting to her have also changed. For baby boys, the custom was to recite this greeting: "May he grow to [a life of] Torah, the wedding canopy, and good deeds." For girls, the traditional greeting was: "May she grow to the wedding canopy and to good deeds." Increasingly, during the past few years, one hears the words "to Torah" inserted in her blessing as well.

The wedding ceremony. Generally speaking, in the traditional Jewish wedding ceremony, the bride and female guests had few vocalized roles. The bride was covered with the veil by her husband (*bedeken*), she walked seven times around her husband under the wedding canopy;<sup>2</sup> she accepted the ring on her index finger; she accepted the *ketubah*, the marriage contract. But she recited no words, nor did any of the woman guests participate in any of the special honors associated with the wedding ceremony. I am certain that no bride in Jewish history ever took slight or felt mistreated at the beautiful traditional wedding ceremony, for no matter how little formal ritual participation, she 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 been observed at Orthodox weddings during this last score of years.

Item: A female guest reading the *ketubah* (marriage contract) during the ceremony.

Item: Women holding up the poles of a portable *chuppah* (the marriage canopy).

Item: A bride reciting under the *chuppah* some words of love, usually taken from Song of Songs. In such instances, this is done after the marriage ceremony has technically been completed with the recitation by the husband of the marriage formula, "Behold, with this ring you are consecrated unto me according to the laws of Moses and Israel."

Item: The *kallah's* (bride's) *tish*, parallel to the *chattan's* (groom's) *tish*. "Tish" means table, but actually refers to the pre-ceremony gathering of men (usually around a table set with light fare) where the groom will recite words of Torah. I was present at a *kallah's tish* where the bride's sister, a Talmud teacher, gave the *d'var Torah*.

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 *chuppah*, one at a time, each to recite words of blessing corresponding to the seven blessings that are part of the traditional ceremony.

Item: At the *sheva berakhot*, the post-wedding feast that lasts for a week after the wedding, women have been called upon to recite one of the seven blessings.

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, the mothers have also joined in blessing the bride.

Death and mourning: (A.) Because of its mystery and taboo, death tended to sharpen the divide between the sexes. For example, in some cemeteries run by the more right-wing *chevrah kadisha* (holy burial societies), women may not enter the cemetery but must remain at the entrance gate. In some instances, this

includes the female mourner as well. (B.) 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, at some funerals, while male and female visitors sit separately in the funeral parlor, the family of mourners sit together, undivided by sex. (C.) And yet further, the domino effect of one aspect of tradition upon the other—in this case, women's more constrained liturgical role—mutes the natural impulse. Because of the absence of obligation upon women to be part of a *minyan*, they do not recite the mourner's *kaddish* (recited only in the presence of a *minyan*) even though they recite other parts of the service constituted by a *minyan*, such as the *kedusha* or the *borchu*. (D.) Because of the vulnerability of the moment, decisions made by others are unquestioned and unchallenged. Occasionally, female mourners will describe a sense of bewilderment at being told no. Only after the fact do they occasionally articulate their heightened sense of loss at not being able to honor the dead in the same manner as did their brothers, sons, or spouses.

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

Item: Individual women are taking up the responsibility of *kaddish*, 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 recover in the framework of a loving community. Some women, albeit very few (far fewer than in the liberal denominations where many women recite the daily *kaddish*), have taken upon themselves the daily *kaddish*. Some have described the spiritual experience as well as the process of their integration. Regarding the latter, the pattern usually runs something like this: during the first few mornings, the regulars of the *minyan* are somewhat uncomfortable, and everyone shifts around nervously as a woman appears. Since the weekday services are attended only by men, and in fewer numbers than on a Shabbat, these services are often held in a smaller room or chapel of the synagogue, where there is no *mehitza* (partition, screen, or curtain separating men and women). Therefore, for the first few mornings, a woman usually recites her prayers and *kaddish* from the hall. Within a very few days, a special section is created for her, with a *mehitza*, so that she is not outside in the hall but rather in the room with the rest of the petitioners. Little by little, she becomes part

of the group of regular "*minyanares*," though services will never begin until ten men have assembled. None of the women who have described their experience have ever reported any hostility toward them. On the contrary, after the initial hesitation and mild suspicion, they are treated with graciousness and welcomed. By the time the eleventh month rolls around, they have become such regular features of the group that the men are sorry to see them leave, which inevitably they do. So far.

Item: 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 in the house of the mourners for morning, afternoon, and evening prayers, and the *kaddish* is recited at all of these. In order for additional *kaddish* to be recited, and in order to create a demarcation between the afternoon and evening prayers, which are usually held in tandem, five to ten minutes of study is inserted in between. Usually, one of the visitors will teach a few verses from the Mishnah and then relate it to the deceased.

At one particular *kaddish minyan* not long ago, it was the granddaughter and granddaughter-in-law who taught the Mishnah 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? Both granddaughters live simultaneously in the Orthodox community and in the modern world; both are well-educated; one of them is also a strong feminist, they were trained to show great respect for their grandparents, and because they loved their grandfather very much and were very close to him they wanted to have some special part in this period of mourning. It is interesting to note that the father of the daughter and daughter-in-law was not quite comfortable, though his wife was all for it. In fact, if someone other than his children had 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, lined up the arguments around that position. But here it was his own girls and he heard their plea. However, reciting *kaddish* after a woman's learning was more than he could handle. His compromise was that after the two young 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 other *kaddish minyan* somewhere else in the country, a woman will teach the Mishnah and those assembled will recite the *kaddish* immediately following.

**6. Learning.** Look for the locus of feminist values in a particular denomination and you will find it different in each one. The study of sacred texts and of rabbinic literature—that is where feminism has most powerfully taken root in the Orthodox community. Clearly we are witnessing an explosion of women's learning. Some would demur, saying that feminist values have had nothing to do with this increase in women's Torah study, but I believe the timing is more than mere coincidence.

The Orthodox community always emphasized the study of Talmud. A very high value was placed on its learning, and great status was conferred upon the learned. However, women were never part of this exalted enterprise. My two sisters and I grew up in a home in which primary emphasis was placed on Jewish education for females. My parents uprooted themselves and moved across the continent in search of the best Jewish schooling that could be had. Yet, neither my sisters nor I were ever introduced to a page of the Talmud in all of our years of elementary, high school and college-level education. By contrast, all of my male cousins had many pages of Talmud behind them by the time they were thirteen. All that has changed.

Item: Today, young women in *yeshiva* day schools are taught Talmud at an early age, the very same age as their brothers are introduced to that subject.

Item: Institutions of higher learning have been created specifically for women, and many fine institutions that previously were restricted to men now open their doors to women.

Item: There are all kinds of encouragements in the community for women to develop themselves in these areas. In local communities, women study not only Talmud, but, more significantly, manage to carve out the time for regular learning, regular *shurim* (classes or fixed times for study).

Item: As the pool of women who learn enlarges, so does the number of those who commit themselves seriously and over a long term to the study of religious texts, and so, too, does the number of women who become teachers in the

community, including teachers of Talmud and *halakha*. There are now a dozen or so Orthodox women around the world who teach Talmud. Incredible!

**7. Leadership.** All of this discussion about learning brings me around to the subject of leadership, because learning and leadership are inextricably linked in Orthodox Judaism. It seems not at all unreasonable, therefore, to make the following prediction: In the not too distant future, women in the Orthodox community will also hold the title of rabbi. The explosion of women's learning combined with the very powerful model of women rabbis in the liberal denominations is surely going to create that fact. Perhaps they will not serve as pulpit rabbis, certainly not initially—for the community will not be ready for that step—but that is not to worry about now. The first step is the ordination of women which follows mastery of the texts. I believe we will witness this in our time because we are charted along an irreversible course, and because women, in significant numbers, will become proficient in all the materials that qualify them for ordination.

Meanwhile, we can also rejoice in the fact that so many women have assumed lay leadership roles.

Item: Women serve as officers of synagogues, up to and including the office of vice-president. I am certain that somewhere in the United States, a capable woman will be offered the presidency of an Orthodox synagogue, a broad leap from her status of a generation ago where women could not even vote as members of an Orthodox *shul*.

Item: Several women are now serving as executive directors of Orthodox synagogues.

Item: Women serve on rabbinic search committees of their local synagogues. Some of these women take advantage of this opportunity to query a rabbinic candidate on attitudes toward women's issues.

Item: In Israel, women have been elected to the town rabbinic councils following the landmark Leah Shaktiel case.

Item: Women serve as chairpersons and as guests of honor at *yeshiva* dinners. The all-male dais can now be found only in the right-wing *yeshiva* world.



Earlier, I stated that in the Orthodox community feminism is not systematically used as a hermeneutic to redefine the law. But one can easily see that it has

influenced change. Everything I have described is a departure from the past yet is considered *halakhi* acceptable by some segment of the Orthodox community.

But so what? When I began this lecture, I said that a lot has happened. I'm sure that some of you are still waiting to hear some news, to be surprised; to some of you it might all seem totally inconsequential; many of these celebrated increments are almost laughable! So what is women recite a bit of Torah in public? So what if a girl stands in a synagogue in the women's section and the rabbi recognizes her on her *bat-mitzvah* day? So what if a Jewish lout must still be shamed into giving his wife a *gel*? What is so remarkable about the fact that a Jewish child finally carries both mother's and father's names? Besides, you would be altogether correct in reminding me that many of the examples I shared with you were nothing more than one-time episodes, mere flukes. I could not even tell you if they were ever repeated. So what am I talking about when I say a lot has happened? In the course of hoping and longing, have I become totally disconnected from reality?

But I believe these changes are highly significant, in fact revolutionary. There are two reasons for this conviction:

1. Taken item by item, none are earth-shaking but all together they add up to something highly significant: the redefinition of women's role in the community. That is why I call the feminist revolution in Orthodoxy a "revolution of small signs." All these tiny steps reflect new spiritual expectations of and by Orthodox women. Each act proclaims the growing acceptance of women in public Jewish roles. The presumption today is for women to locate themselves in the house of study and in the synagogue, as well as in the home and in the *mikveh*. Slowly, a woman's presence in sacred settings is becoming demystified. The taboos against seeing and hearing her in communal acts of holiness are lifting.

One independent confirmation of these new expectations is the *eruv* (mixing or bringing together). Among the types of work forbidden on the Sabbath is transporting items through the public domain. By way of the *eruv*, the Rabbis theoretically mixed together the public and private domains; through this legal fiction, the public domain becomes an extension of the private and, thus, one may carry through it. But legal fiction alone cannot transform the domain. There has to be some kind of bridging of the areas. The *eruv*, which in the case of property consists of connected poles, wires, ropes, existing telephone wires, etc., creates a

circumference that encircles and links together the public and private domains. It takes a considerable amount of effort and ingenuity 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 did not follow the injunction not to carry on the Sabbath).

Thus, a woman with an infant could not push a baby carriage on her way to the synagogue. Most mothers of very young children did not see the inside of a synagogue on the Sabbath for months at a time. And if a woman was actively bearing children for five years and did not have help in the home, then likely she did not attend synagogue on the Sabbath for five years. What is more, no one would have missed her. That is how it was for young families during the years when my husband and I raised our children. Often I hired a baby-sitter; but equally often I simply didn't go.

In the last fifteen years, there has been a tremendous expansion of *eruvim* (plural) in cities all around the United States—wherever there are concentrations of young Orthodox families. On Sabbath morning, one can see a plethora of strollers and carriages lined up outside of *shul*, a testimony to the presence of young mothers whose own mothers and grandmothers nuded them at home on Sabbath mornings. Today, a self-respecting young couple would not move to a neighborhood where there is no *eruv*; prospective home-buyers make this their first question; real estate brokers put the word *eruv* into their advertising. Women's presence in *shul* is anticipated!!

2. The second reason these small signs are so important is that this is a community that lives by precedent. Each individual experience, each unique experiment, previously untested but now deemed to be not contrary to *halakha* expands the art of the possible. Each kosher precedent that is legitimate in one *halakha*-abiding community or family, can be replicated, many times over, by others who wish to do so. Of course, there are many 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, and Rabbi X gave it the O.K. because he performed that wedding, then perhaps we can do the same at our wedding."

The power of a model is far greater than a discussion or an argument on a theoretical level. You can have a thousand discussions on whether women can do

this or that, but if you have one live case and it "passes," the argument is ended—or better yet, never engaged.



Of course, this is a much slower process, cranking it out inch by inch. But there is something to be said even for this. Another angle of vision from which to consider the matter of small signs is the sense of being connected to the Divine. If you take incremental steps, as opposed to giant ones, you feel joined to the tradition and not detached from it. You maintain a sense of being part of this organic whole; your actions are felt as continuous with the tradition. When there is organic change, everything seems to fit, novelty is not felt as novelty; it is not perceived to be at odds or in tension with what when before but rather flows forward smoothly through time, history, and community.

This is one of the great strengths of Orthodoxy. On the one hand, I believe the pace could be speeded up in many areas; on the other, the slow pace has uniquely enabled us to monitor the effects of feminism on a monotheistic religion. We still do not know the answer to this vital question: to what extent and at what pace can you change from what was, and still continue to hear the commanding voice, still feel Revelation coming through all of it? It is a highly complex issue because once you start to pull at the threads, you alter the whole fabric. Introducing change can both enhance and diminish the power of the commanding voice. The question is, what is the cut off point on the downside? Orthodoxy offers a model, a community that has had the ability to maintain both the authority and the sense of Revelation through all the intervening years from Sinai onward, and it may well be Orthodoxy that will shed light on that question. Of feminism and Orthodoxy it might be said: there are two ways to get to the revolution



One last benefit accruing from this marriage of feminism and Orthodoxy. All of the answers about equality of roles are not yet in. Years ago, I used to think that every role or ritual that was distributed differently among men and women deserved a cry of sexism.

Today, I no longer hold that view. I have now come to realize that a definition of equality-as-identity is not the best definition. I do not believe that such a definition will serve the human race as well as a one that also allows for some very distinctive roles—equality and gender distinctiveness. The very broad

distinctions of male and female from the past certainly will have to go, but doing away with them does not mean that there is no room for both maintaining and creating some very specific, well defined roles and rituals for each gender. Distinctiveness is not necessarily a symbol of inequity. Nor does blurring all the lines, and at a rapid pace, guarantee fulfillment of the grand design. On the contrary, such a blurring would be a blueprint for great confusion ahead. Surely there must be value to retaining at least some definitions of male and female beyond biology. And if this is so, as I intuit it to be from what I see around me, then finely detailed ritual is a warm-spirited way to differentiate, taking differences beyond the immediacy of gender relationships to a transcendent place.

Thus, a tradition that moves with greater caution in redefining male and female roles serves not only as recorder and anchor for Jews but also has something to say to all of contemporary society.



Having said that I must say the other, lest anyone confuse acceptance of distinctions with standing pat on 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 press, they deserve, if not an open welcome and praise, then, at the very least, a moratorium on suspicion and snide comments. The creation of rituals that affirm the covenantal experiences of girls and of women; the religious expression of events and sensations that are unique to women; the broader realization of women's aspirations to leadership—all of this lies ahead.



Which brings me to the very last point. How will all of this happen? I believe that it will happen exactly to the extent that women in the Orthodox community will want it to be so. At this moment in time, it is true that 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. But to say that change will occur precisely in relationship to the 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.

Feminism may not exactly be the hermeneutic, but it is the first lever to push. As it increasingly acts upon the lives of women in the Orthodox community, the process will move forward, the *halakha* will open, and we will see a definition of equality and distinctiveness that will carry us faithfully forward into the next 4,000 years.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to Judith Romney Wegner of Providence, Rhode Island, who shared this insight with me in a personal conversation several years ago.

<sup>2</sup>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 an act can be interpreted in any which way, I believe the sexist interpretation is much off the mark. It is not consistent with the basic thrust of the ceremony—a sanctification of the union—now with the contents of the *ketubah*—which primarily focus on this obligation to her and not vice versa.

## Literature in Search of a Center

Mark Shechner

THE QUESTION IS never out of mind. What is distinctive about Jewish writing in America and what might it be besides certain constants of locale or gradients of voice, which could be as much urban or modern as they are Jewish, that could mark out a piece of writing as Jewish in its provenance and its significance? Is there a verbal or thematic test we could apply to any book that would yield definitive answers, or have the margins between the Jewish and the non-Jewish become so blurred that there is no *a priori* way to distinguish a novel by John Updike from one by Mark Helprin—*Bech. A Book*, say, from *A Winter's Tale*—on ethnic grounds. I don't know of a satisfying answer to that question, and it is not hard to understand why scholars tend to tiptoe around it. In truth, I don't believe that there exists such a litmus test. Jewishness is nothing like a gene or a virus, a tint or a taint; it doesn't show up in diagnostic samples. A hundred years ago in Poland there might have been a simple and sufficient test: Is a book written in Polish or in Yiddish? Forty years later in America other tests might well have been sufficient: is it set in Boston or on Delancey Street? Does the hero hook his fish in a trout stream or haggle for it at a pushcart? Clearly, the diffusion of Jewish life into the American mainstream and the virtual erasure of linguistic and social boundaries make any such tests now problematic, if not foolish. Whatever Jewish writing may be in America, it does not announce itself through simple insignias, like the old symbolism of Freudian dream theory, that anyone can interpret from a handy reference manual.

And yet for all that the question of differences is not an idle one to be dismissed out of hand, since to do that is to declare the category of "Jewish writing"