

ULTRA-ORTHODOX WOMEN CONFRONT FEMINISM

No one would deny that things have improved for Orthodox women during the last decade. Real gains have been made: gender equality is no longer considered a heresy; feminists are not pariahs; even the very phrase "Orthodox feminism" is no longer an oxymoron.

But all of that is a half-truth. Orthodoxy is not monolithic. Although the lines between Modern Orthodoxy and ultra-Orthodoxy are not perfectly drawn—there are individuals in each community who cross them easily—the general outlines are clear enough. Perhaps nowhere is the distinction sharper than in the area of women's issues. In the ultra-Orthodox community—even in its relatively modern wing—feminism is still considered anathema. At the annual Agudath Israel conventions, attended by several thousand men and women, feminism is still perceived as the destroyer of families; Orthodox feminists are publicly excoriated. Few women, if any, from the ultra-Orthodox community would attend a feminist conference or gathering.

The separation and taboos increase daily as the lines between

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men and women are drawn ever more sharply. In some ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods women sit at the back of the bus, quite literally. Some supermarkets in these neighborhoods now have separate shopping hours for men and women. *Mechitzot* separating men from women in synagogues don't merely grow higher from year to year; they wall off women altogether. Talmud study is still basically off limits to women. Invitations to family celebrations go out in the name of "Reb Schwartz and his Wife."

Communities that would seem ripe for an *eruv*—a symbolic boundary that lifts Shabbat restrictions on, among other things, wheeling baby strollers on Shabbat—nonetheless disallow the use of an *eruv*, thereby confining mothers with young children to their homes on Shabbat.

Restrictions abound over the concept of *kol isha*—literally, a woman's voice—declaring that a woman may not sing in the presence of men because a woman's voice may lead to sexual excitement. Plans for the

Rabin commemoration in Madison Square Garden almost fell apart when Barbra Streisand was invited to sing at the event and the ultra-Orthodox threatened to pull out. (Eventually, the ultra-Orthodox agreed to enter the hall after Streisand's appearance; ultimately, Streisand declined to attend.)

Whether a prospective bride fully accepts *kol isha*—which extends even to singing (or rather, not singing) *zemirot* around the Shabbat dinner table—is a standard question asked by ultra-Orthodox *shadchanim* when they try to match up suitable partners. So nonnegotiable has this become, that it has spilled over into the Modern Orthodox community, where *kol isha* had previously been on the wane.

Women in the ultra-Orthodox community are neither defensive nor apologetic about this state of affairs. In fact, they speak with a measure of pride about the growing separation, and, indeed, they are accessories to it. Recently, at the *brit* of her infant son, a young mother stood with the women at a respectable distance from the men—although this was a social hall, not a synagogue, and the cere-

mony was not part of a prayer service since it was held midmorning. As the ceremony got underway, the young woman's brother motioned to her to come closer. But she responded with a hand gesture that said, "Don't push me, my distance here is just fine." Like many ultra-Orthodox, she felt no sense of discrimination or of second-class citizenship.

Why do thinking, intelligent, lovely women feel this way about "knowing their place and staying in it"? Why do they feel no restlessness? Surely they know what is going on in the world all around them, regarding women's greater access and acceptance; yet they reject it vigorously. Why?

One reason is that these women are not suffering, as some outside the community might think. The life of an Orthodox Jewish woman, like that of an Orthodox man, ultra- or Modern, is good, very good. No system is free of internal problems,

An Orthodox wedding in Brooklyn. In the ultra-Orthodox community women undeniably wield power in the home and workplace, but increasingly yield to their husband's insistence that they not sing in the presence of men—even at their own Shabbat tables. The author predicts that these women will not long submit to these and other limits on their right to self-expression.

and Orthodoxy has its fair share, but the texture of life is richly satisfying. The sense of purpose and commitment cannot be taken lightly, and the feelings of security and well-being that come from knowing exactly what is expected cannot be ignored. Women who sit in the back of the bus see this act in context, as part of a whole way of life. At worst, separation is seen as a trade-off one must make for the gift of tradition and community. This inner contentment explains, at least in part, why some women of feminist background—even some radical feminists—can enter the ultra-Orthodox community as *ba'alot teshuva* (newly observant Jews) and voluntarily park their feminism at the door, no apologies proffered or expected.

A second factor has to do with the real power and authority these women have, and have had, in their families. The "Wife" of the invitation in fact organized the entire event, ordered the invitations, made all the decisions—and she knows it. Moreover, as the community has grown in wealth, there is more disposable income, and women have considerable discretion in money matters. Boro Park, for example, prominent home to the ultra-Orthodox, has become a fashion and shopping center. Women from

California make biannual jaunts to the Brooklyn neighborhood with the same anticipatory gusto that women from Greensboro enjoy going to Bergdoff's. The clothing, the glamorous *sheitels* (wigs), the children's attire, the elaborate baby carriages, the teenagers who know just how to put modesty and chic together, are a growing phenomenon in the ultra-Orthodox world. That is not to say that everyone in these communities is wealthy, but even in poorer families, women's material needs are not put last.

This combination of spiritual and material well-being is a powerful one and translates easily into affirming the status quo.

Thus, women have signed on to the increasing separation in Orthodoxy and the hierarchy it represents and have even been able to articulate it. "This is how men and women serve God differently," they say. "Kol isha is God's design for gender relations..."

But I do not think this ultra-Orthodox resistance and antagonism to feminism—to its questioning, its drive to incorporate women more fully in the religious and social life of the community—will last. Ultra-Orthodox leaders would do well to take a good look now and begin to address issues of

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50TH ANNIVERSARY

Tuesday, November 9, 1993, the anniversary of Kristallnacht. I could feel the beating of my heart as we approached the gray, faceless housing block in Kielce, Poland, where Henryk Blaszczyk lives. How ironic that on the day commemorating the first pogrom in Nazi Europe, I was headed for an encounter with the man blamed for the last pogrom.

I had arrived in Kielce several days earlier. I was scheduled to spend a week in residence there, lecturing to seminarians on Jewish interpretations of the Bible. Kielce's was the third of four Polish Catholic seminaries on my tour. Arranged by Polish archbishop Henryk Muszynski and approved by both the Polish Episcopate and the Holy See (and sponsored by the American Jewish Committee), the trip had been labeled historic. Never before had a Jewish professor lived and lectured here in the bosom of Catholic Poland. I was quite a phenomenon in Gniezno and Olsztyn—I was regarded not

as just another Jew visiting Poland, but as a representative of the Jewish people, the "elder brother," welcomed into the bosom of the Church. I found both the seminarians and faculty enthusiastic and open-minded.

But what could I expect in Kielce, where neighbors, not Nazis, murdered their last Jews? I knew only the bare outlines of the terrible events of July 4, 1946: After the war, Jews returning to Kielce from DP (displaced persons) camps were attacked by their neighbors. Forty-two Jews killed. Many more wounded. A mass exodus of Jews from Poland began.

It was enough to make me more than a little uneasy. Would anyone I meet remember the pogrom? Would some of them have participated in it? What reception would I find in this Jew-forsaken city? What memories of Jews survived?

Although my official topic was the Bible—neutral academic ground—seminarians had asked many questions about contemporary Jews and Judaism as well. At the same time, they showed little knowledge

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equality for women. Otherwise, within a decade or two, when the women of the community will be ready to press for greater inclusion, the rabbis of the community will not be ready for them.

Feminism has already had a powerful impact on women's lives in the ultra-Orthodox community, though it remains an unacknowledged force. For example, many women, including those with large families, now work outside the home. The jobs are as diverse as surgery, accounting, bead-stringing, and sheitel-making. These working women see life and work outside of the community not simply as a way to put their husbands through the *kollel* (postgraduate yeshivah studies) or help support large families but also as a form of self-actualization. Job satisfaction and a sense of fulfillment have become real issues in the ultra-Orthodox community. It is only a matter of time until a woman who is addressed as Dr. or Your Honor or Director will not be wholly comfortable with "Wife" or No Name or No Presence at all.

Ultra-Orthodox women increasingly gather to express themselves, to deliberate, to enjoy each other's company, to build support networks. At conferences for and about women, significant in and of themselves, there may be no formal discussion of the dissonance between Jewish law and women's needs. Yet the sub-texts of the events, and, I suspect, some of the informal conversations, do harbor kernels of what might now be considered subversive thought but which will be at the center of a reasonable Orthodox feminist agenda in a decade or so.

Moreover, while women's voices may not be heard in song, they are heard increasingly through the printed word. Books written by ultra-Orthodox women appear in Jewish bookstores; collections and anthologies of their writings grow in number. The fact that many articles in these anthologies are published under pseudonyms symbolizes the desire, even demand, for honesty of expression. The blather of apologetics and party line is no longer the standard in ultra-Orthodox women's writings. Complaint, celebration, and self-awareness can be heard in this new literature.

The model of women in other communities is not lost on women of this community. Recently, at the wedding of a mutual

friend, I sat between a heavily wigged *mikveh* lady and a Reform rabbi. I introduced them. "Pardon me if I don't call you 'Rabbi,'" said the *mikveh* lady, "but I just can't, even though I think you're a very nice lady." Even the fact that ultra-Orthodox women speak of Jewish feminism with disdain means that they are aware and grappling.

Kol isha is a stifling measure that diminishes the spirit and soul of women who love to sing. It will ultimately go the way of the emperor's new clothes, for a woman's voice in religious song is erotic only if someone declares it to be. As women increasingly seek self-expression, they will challenge the notion that women's song is a stimulant to lascivious thought, for in their hearts they know that women's song is the very echo of an intense Jewish spirituality.

Finally, while Talmud remains closed to them, ultra-Orthodox women are nevertheless taking part in the learning revolution. Young girls and adult women now study a much wider range of sacred texts. Some women teach in settings that were previously closed to them, such as adult education classes and yeshivos for young boys. Though she is not quite the norm, a well-known rebbetzin in the Midwest travels on the ultra-Orthodox lecture circuit giving *shiurim*, or religious lessons, to men as well as to women—something that would have been unheard of a generation ago.

As they increasingly experience the great gift given to Jewish women of our time—the direct first-person experience of an ever-widening pool of sacred texts—they will begin to reach for the study of Talmud as well. All justifications for keeping women and Talmud apart will be challenged. Women exposed today to Talmud studies bring to it a great spiritual energy and love of learning. They are exhilarated by the veritable feast of rabbinic wisdom, closed to women for so many centuries, now pouring forth like a great gushing well. Ultra-Orthodox women will want to be joined to this precious enterprise.

All this, I believe, will unfold peacefully in the next decade or so—and it will be a good thing for the community. Women's increasing presence and status is a major gap between Modern Orthodoxy and ultra-Orthodoxy. Narrowing this gap will strengthen interdependence and decrease the danger of division between the groups.

Orthodoxy should not be split into

sectarian groups; we are small enough as it is. Not all differences need be obliterated, but at least we should be walking in a similar direction. In a recent pre-election campaign in Israel, the religious parties considered merging. But the ultra-Orthodox said they would pull out if a woman won a seat on the Modern Orthodox ticket. Such a stance not only demeans women, it diminishes the strength of each group.

The ultra-Orthodox community also has something valuable to offer the rest of the Jewish community—a message about faith commitment as well as an important critique. Orthodoxy can serve as a powerful corrective to the loose social and sexual mores of contemporary society.

This corrective, however, will not be heard if it comes from a community that excludes women and takes totally separatist positions. To be a "light unto the nations"—as all Jews are bidden to be—the ultra-Orthodox should explore ways to integrate and internalize the best of the new values for women. They would not only serve society at large, but also their own community, their own women, and their own future. ♀

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