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# Women of Faith in Dialogue

Edited by Virginia Ramey Mollenkott

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## Confrontation and Change: Women and the Jewish Tradition

*Blu Greenberg*

When you have labored for what seems to be a long time for issues that concern women of faith, you may begin to experience an emotional and spiritual burnout. Sometimes, even if you strive quietly and gently, the spiritual ties that bind begin to fray. Sometimes, the energy used for vigilance begins to sap your own religious strength and integrity. Sometimes, you confront the traditional sources you love so much, and find them wanting. And resistant. Sometimes, experimentation in ritual that gives women greater expression seems to generate more self-consciousness than it does connection to the holy. These are restless times—and though I feel optimistic about the future, I feel restless too.

I must confess with some sadness that while I follow the mitzvot (the tenets of Judaism) with care, and while I feel a great and close affinity for my own community (that of

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Orthodox Judaism) I have not felt a surge of the spirit in a great while. And I long for it. Not all the time, but every once in a while. I long to be the deeply devout person I once was, in my more innocent life where everything God said was sacred and everything that was sacred was said by God. I know it has something to do with eating the apple and knowing. Yet I also know I can never go back. I would never want to.

Living in that tension, then, is the lot of women who are unwilling to say of Judaism or Christianity, "It is hopelessly antifeminist and, therefore, it is finished," or "We are finished with it." Instead, we choose to live in the creative tension that comes not of wanting to leave but rather of wanting to enter our faith-communities more fully.

There are certain basic premises we keep in mind as we take up the tasks of change and confrontation. I believe these premises are common to women of all faith communities, though I speak of them here in the language of my own community.

First, we understand that history and sociology, not just tradition, are normative or at least can be used as interpretive keys. Yet we also wrestle with other truths: that Torah and tradition stand by themselves, independent, outside of history. Revelation intersects history, yet remains apart from it. We must learn to move intelligently within that dialectic.

Second, we understand on a practical level the need to balance change and continuity. This is as important for the individual psyche as it is for community cohesion. Any religion that is reduced to social relativism isn't going to offer very much in the way of sacredness, anchors, roots, or a sense of existential security that comes of knowing where we are located and what is expected of us.

Third, we have learned that it is easier to destroy than to build up, so we are careful about what we choose to destroy.

Fourth, we feel a love and a protectiveness of our own

faith-community and its value system, even as we judge, nudge, criticize, and move ever farther beyond the perimeters that are so closely drawn. In fact, it is precisely because we feel primarily the connection and commitment and not the distance or disinterest that we stay within the community and do so many things that go against our grain or that cause discomfort in others.

Fifth, we know that there are times in the history of a faith-community when obedience through lack of pride is the greater sin, and unrestful rebellion is the greater merit. We will not be intimidated by those who want to dismiss us.

All this being so, trade-offs are the name of the game in confrontation and change within our faith-communities. For example, the Orthodox community has often been criticized for its retention of one of the early morning blessings recited by a male: "Blessed be Thou O Lord Ruler of the Universe, who hast not made me a woman." In a parallel prayer, a woman says, "Blessed be Thou O Lord Ruler of the Universe, who hast created me according to Thy will." (This latter blessing was added into the liturgy more than a thousand years after the first prayer — a symbol of both problem and progress).

Although contemporary defenders of the male morning blessing offer apologetic exegesis (leaning heavily on the benign tradition that man is superior only insofar as he is obligated by more commandments), I am compelled to say that the blessing is sexist in tone if not in original intent — and my own belief is that it was indeed sexist in intent. I, too, can cite a few traditional commentaries in support of my interpretation. Yet I have a real dilemma here. For I must acknowledge that those Jews who point to sexism in the morning blessing are the same ones who long ago gave up saying that blessing, or any other of the morning blessings, which go as follows:

Blessed be Thou, Lord our God. King of the Universe, who hast given the rooster intelligence to distinguish between day and night.

- . . . who hast not made me a heathen
- . . . who hast not made me a slave
- . . . who hast not made me a woman [for men]
- . . . who hast made me according to Thy will [for women]
- . . . who opens the eyes of the blind
- . . . who clothes the naked
- . . . who sets the captives free
- . . . who raises up those who are bowed down
- . . . who spreads forth the earth above the waters
- . . . who has provided for all my needs
- . . . who guides the steps of man
- . . . who girds Israel with might
- . . . who crowns Israel with glory
- . . . who gives strength to the weary
- . . . who removes sleep from my eyes and slumber from my eyelids.

These blessings, as a whole, represent a kind of spiritual stretching exercise, where nothing is taken for granted. So while I hope to see the male blessing, authentic and ancient as it is, newly paraphrased in a way that doesn't suggest male hierarchy, I still continue to place my bets with the community that has not abandoned the daily liturgy or consigned it to a few of its rabbis. For all my quarrel with that blessing and what it symbolizes, I still prefer to identify with the community that understands and has taught me that one ought to give thanks to God for waking up alive, alert, and in good health, every single day of one's life. I know how hard it is to rebuild a habit of liturgy once it is destroyed. These are the trade-offs I must continually make.

There are two arenas for bringing about change. Both, of course, involve confrontation: one arena is tradition, and the

other is community. Each is interdependent upon the other.

What does it mean to confront tradition, the sources, the sacred texts? How can one confront the Torah, Talmud, centuries of rabbinic interpretation, layers of haggadic and halachic material, centuries-old ethical and legal concepts, authoritative codes of law, and so forth? We confront, bringing to our study and our search the new theology of women, a new yardstick by which to understand our faith and history, and against which we test all the material therein. The new yardstick is the basic principle of feminism, that women are equal, created equally in the image of God, and therefore have equal potential, ability, and aspirations. This theology says that women must have a full equality in matters of mind, spirit, and deed.

I rather like this task of confronting tradition. It can be quite fruitful. It's amazing what rich veins there are to mine in an ancient tradition. In fact, confronting the sources provides much of the wherewithal for confronting community.

For me, this confrontation is a religious experience, a holy task in itself, one that binds me up with God and with the Jewish people, even though I come, so to speak, with a quarrel. In Judaism, study is equated with prayer. I have come to understand that that is no mere prescription. Rather, it is a very real description of human emotions involved in encountering sacred literature, no matter how critical the intellectual enterprise may be.

By means of the yardstick of women's equality we can trace how much reinterpretation the tradition has undergone in the course of two or three thousand years, particularly on women's issues. One example is Jewish divorce law. The Bible tells us that a man who wishes to divorce his wife must write a writ of divorce, put it in her hand, and send her away. We can understand this scriptural norm in two ways. We can view it simply as reflective of the sexism in the Bible, a male-oriented, patriarchal, patrilineal, patrilocal society,

with men having all the initiative and making all the moves. But another way is to see it as the first step toward reducing male divorce rights and, hence, as a protection for women.

In the ancient Near East, a man, in a flash of anger or frustration, could pronounce orally his intent to divorce, and the woman was irrevocably divorced. Under those circumstances, a wife had to be very careful about challenging or confronting her husband; she had to take great care lest she displease him. Biblical law, however, required the formal drawing up of a writ of divorce. This operated as a delaying tactic, with the opportunity to frame each episode in the context of the total relationship—a strategy as necessary to the building of a marriage in these times as it was in those days. It was a small protection, but it signaled the direction Jewish divorce law was to take as it unfolded through history.

Rabbinic law includes all sorts of modifications of man's absolute rights: first, it required a man to show cause. He would not simply divorce a woman at will. (This however, was not necessarily always a protection for a woman, because once the cause of divorce was known, it would be less likely that she would find another husband). During rabbinic times, polygamy was *de facto*, and finally *de jure*, eliminated. In most cases, a woman could not be divorced against her will. The *ketubah* was formulated in rabbinic times: this was a marriage contract that stipulated all sorts of economic conditions to discourage divorce. The *ketubah* also protected a woman in marriage, specifying what her husband's obligations were to her. Dowry money was held in escrow for the wife. The rabbis could coerce a man, through the use of sanctions, into granting a divorce to a woman who wanted one. A court of law, in certain situations, was empowered to annul marriage. And so on.

Still, a great problem exists today in that a man still has the initiative and can withhold a divorce for selfish reasons.

But we know, as a consequence of applying our yardstick to the study of sources, that this is not at all what halacha wanted to achieve. We can say that Jewish law contains the well-tested principle of women's redress in cases of recalcitrant husbands. We can point to Jewish legal precedents and build upon them. For example, if talmudic law permits a woman to pay for the scribe to write the "man's" writ, the halachists of today must interpret the law to allow women to initiate, authorize, and deliver the Jewish divorce writ. There has been both logical and historical growth of women's rights in Judaism, and we must foster this by pointing out its roots in the religio-legal literature.

In some situations, confrontation can force a break or a reversal of the direction tradition has taken. For example, in the area of women and liturgy, or women and learning, tradition moves toward a limiting of women's formal expression. Women were at Sinai; they experienced the peak moment of revelation. But they were not invited back. As tradition unfolded, women historically were not found in the house of study, nor were they counted as members in good standing of the holy congregation. Only recently has this exclusion begun to change.

In these instances, we are obliged to summon forth the larger principles of equality of women and of women entering the tradition more fully. We have to articulate these in Jewish categories, and apply them creatively to ritual and religious expression. The basic premise is not that Revelation was wrong, for that would take us nowhere. Rather it is that God spoke to the community in terms appropriate to its understanding and its times; and for most of that history, the hierarchy of the sexes in matters of faith and authority was unchallenged. A theology of women, however, is not completely alien to the tradition. Nor is it new. It was and is God's ultimate plan. Moreover, there are many areas in the tradition where we see a movement from hierarchy to egalitarianism.

tarianism. As Jews, we affirm chosenness and the special election of the Jewish people, but we know this must include women as well as men.

In truth, there have been changes recently even in the areas that were historically associated with men only. Women can now find, here and there, communities that accommodate their spiritual needs by offering women's *minyanim* (prayer groups) and women's schools of higher learning. There has been an amazing explosion of women's encounter with sacred sources, exegesis, and halachic literature—encounters that were closed off to them for so long.

But what about confronting the community? That is the harder task, for, as we all know, even the best-intentioned religious establishment is slow to respond to change. Here, I would like to offer some personal guidelines, some thoughts about what works for me, or what would perhaps work better if I would stick to it.

First, our emphasis and energy should properly be directed toward real gains, not toward rhetoric (although you can't avoid rhetoric altogether). We cannot rewrite history, nor would we want to. Despite its limitations for women's issues, it is still sacred history. It is still the tradition that nurtured us, and that made us what we are as women of faith, and we cannot overlook that.

Therefore, don't denigrate it in the face of its believers. Don't overemphasize its negative parts. Don't waste precious time and energy debating the patriarchal nature of the religion. When we speak of women's place in Jewish tradition, we must tell the whole story, give a balanced picture, describe it in its totality. Jewish women were not deliberately oppressed or persecuted by Jewish men; in many instances they were highly regarded, honored, and protected. When we acknowledge this, our claims that women no longer want a pedestal or benign protectiveness and that inequity and

discrimination still exist will be better understood. Without this understanding we might end up talking to ourselves.

Second, we must order our priorities. We cannot do everything, certainly not all at once. If we tried, it would certainly be very frustrating. I see five areas that need improvement, each one significant: learning, leadership, liturgy, legal status, and language. I have come to see that the most important area for Jewish women's religious equality is that of Jewish scholarship, culminating in the ordination of women. When that happens, I believe everything else will fall into place. My second most important area concerns women and Jewish divorce law. If one woman suffers as a result of the law, then the law discriminates against us all.

For the time being, I have simply neglected or temporarily abandoned the complex issue of language: for example the use of masculine pronouns in reference to God and to the holy community. Although I don't personally feel that God is male (despite the extensive use of male pronouns), the rewards of praying in the same words the exact prayer that Jews everywhere have used for two thousand years, means something very special to me. More would be lost than gained for me, I believe, at least in the transition stage, in changing from the familiar. Meanwhile, I read with great interest what others are doing in this area, and I acknowledge that a serious problem exists, but I don't attempt to enter into the controversy.

We have to learn from the women's movement to choose our political measures wisely. Those who say religion and politics should not be spoken in the same breath are not telling the whole story. The political process was often involved in the expansion of ritual.

There are all kinds of political methods we can use. Here is a story of passive resistance: A woman in Montreal wanted a divorce, and her husband would not grant her one. He

demanded twenty-five thousand dollars from her; she refused, and he withheld the divorce. Her friends were horrified at the situation, so thirty of them, all religious women in the Orthodox community, banded together and announced that none of them would go to the *mikveh* (the ritual bath) until the woman was granted a writ of divorce. Those of you who are familiar with Jewish law know that sexual relations cannot be resumed after a woman's menses until she has gone to the *mikveh*. Need I say more? That was the fastest divorce ever granted in the history of Montreal's religious community!

Although the solution of one case for one woman does not solve the whole problem, the idea of organizing and using sanctions is an important approach. I was heartened by it, even though I know it is the exception. We have a lot of homework to do in the development of political strategies. We must also attempt to resolve the problems through changing the law, rather than on a case-by-case basis.

I must admit that part of the problem of inefficient use of political techniques comes from another aspect of women's situation. Many women in the traditional community do not feel beset by any particular problem; they feel satisfied with the roles and responsibilities that tradition has assigned to them. Part of our task, then, is to engage women in the traditional sector, to deal openly and directly with their resistance to changing the status quo. We cannot afford to ignore them. I have found that sometimes you can scratch just a little below the surface and the outer shell of resistance falls away. Women in the traditional sector can be our best allies in moving the community to come to terms with women's issues.

We must address the real concerns of the larger community, concerns such as the Jewish family. The family is and always has been the centerpiece of Jewish life. Yet the family cannot be used as a cover, a code word for closing off full access and equality to women in the faith-community. So it

requires of us two things. First, we must put everything out in the open and distinguish between genuine concern for the family (really a concern for Jewish survival) on the one hand, and concern for women's religious growth and spiritual quest on the other. I believe we can somehow get across the message that if a woman opens her mind, it does not necessarily mean she must shut up her womb. Second, we must help the community to build support for women who want to have the best of both worlds, who do not want to be locked into either-or choices. As Jews, we must again be prepared to separate from those elements in society, and in the women's movement, that do not place the family at the center of the concern for equality and the work for equality around that center.

We should applaud and be grateful for signs of change, even small improvements. We should encourage change, and reward those in authority who make changes, those who experiment. Gradual changes should not be put down as imperfect measures. I believe that Jews are continually moving through history toward perfection; and while the Holocaust denies me total assurance that this is so, I still have the faith that we are moving toward messianic times. I don't intend to wait for the Messiah to rectify women's status in Judaism. Rather, I believe that perfection will come as a result of many small things falling into place properly.

Finally, each of us must choose our own style of confrontation, a style that is appropriate to our own psychology, orientation, and talents. I have chosen to do my work largely through lecturing and writing. I am not good at organizing rallies or protests, although I often think that if I could organize a thousand women to protest this or that injustice or limitation, and do it in the right forum, it would have much greater impact than a thousand speeches. And I am not good at creating or leading a moving liturgical experience for women, even though such experiences might do

more good than the articles I've written on women and liturgy. But I have to use my strengths as they are, given finite time and energy, and I must be content with my own style of nonconfrontational confrontation. I sometimes try to reassure myself in the face of my deficiencies by telling myself that, through research and writing and lecturing, I am attempting to solve the problem wholesale rather than retail.

These, then, are some of the ideas I've developed as I've moved along. There is, of course, a price one pays for confrontation and change. It goes without saying, however, that you cannot have success without pain, just as you cannot have love without pain. I feel, in fact, that all of this enterprise in the area of women and faith during the last decade has made me grow, not only as a woman but as a Jew. So when the dust settles, and women's equality in traditional Judaism has become very natural, then I'll have my religious surges of the spirit once again. Women have waited a very long time; I can wait a little longer.