

cal to Jewish life, and learning is a form of Jewish activism. By working toward situations in which Jewish females are accorded central spiritual significance, educators can help girls and women access Judaism in the most positive way. tion, by making the Jewish classroom a female-friendly environment, Jewish rs will move toward training both men and women to see the full human l in their Judaic tradition and in each other.

Orthodox Feminists: What Do Our Numbers Mean?

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[The following is a slightly edited version of the opening address given at the Second International Conference on Judaism and Feminism which took place in February 1998 in New York. Over 2000 people were in attendance. —Ed.]

As I look out on this scene, the feeling is one of appreciation—and wonderment. We are now 1800 strong and growing every minute. What do our numbers mean? And why now? And what is the message that we take and that we give?

First, I believe this great outpouring means that Orthodox feminists and their sympathizers are no longer at the fringes of our community. We are in and of the mainstream. Although we do not yet occupy the seats of power or hold the interpretive keys in our hands—yet, we do have great leverage and influence and we have been and will continue to be a force for good in the Orthodox community.

But why now, 25 years after feminism first began to take root in the Jewish community—and next week there will be an event commemorating the 25th anniversary of the first National Jewish Women's conference that powerfully influenced so many of us even though we proceeded in different ways —, why now do we have these numbers and this support, including that of so many individual rabbis whose presence we treasure, some of whom have been our partners on these issues for two or three decades, and some who are joining us for the first time?

Because we have proven ourselves! During these past 25 years we have taken in from the host culture the new values for women, and have passed these values onto our daughters and our sons and our grandchildren, and all the while we have remained faithful to *halakhah*, not compromising an orthodox way of life. The critique that we were undermining the Jewish family, destroying Yiddishkeit, have proven to be non-credible. On the contrary, we now know more, daaven more, learn more, teach more, give more, celebrate more. We have built wonderful Jewish families and have enhanced and revitalized all of the communities and institutions that our lives touch and have stayed very close to the core of our communities. We have proven that feminism and Orthodoxy can live happily together.

What else does it mean, this outpouring and enthusiasm? It means that we celebrate together many of the gains of the past two decades: the explosion of women's learning, women of all ages, the study of Talmud, the many institutions for women that have been

created when three decades ago there were barely any; the growth of women's *tefilah*—even during the course of this past year, 40 new *tefilah* [prayer] groups—women taking *daavening* seriously; the religious leadership roles, the new congregational interns, the *toanot* [legal advocates], the *poskot* [legal decisors] and the training programs for them, women on religious councils, women who are presidents of Orthodox synagogues when one generation ago women were not even allowed to be members; women celebrating rites of passage—Bat mitzvah, birth ceremonies, new wedding rituals; and women saying Kaddish. We are living in a time when we experience a profound transformation of the understanding of a woman's place, no longer "the glory of the daughter of the king" exclusively as an inside person, i.e., inside the home, but also inside the synagogue, the courts of law, the houses of study.

What else do our numbers here mean? They mean that we have a task ahead, that an agenda remains before us, waiting for us to take up the issues, one by one. Not all of us agree on all of the issues—and I hasten to add that each person on the program speaks here as an individual, representing him or herself—but at the very least we come to the discussion with an open mind and are prepared to listen to each other with respect. For some of us the issues include expansion of a woman's role in the *mechitzah* minyan, so that she not feel as if she is at the periphery of the spiritual congregation; greater support and less suspicion by the rabbis and lay people of centrist orthodoxy for women's prayer groups; more encouragement for women in religious leadership roles, including, I believe, the ordination of women; and certainly a speedy, long overdue resolution to the problem of the *agunah*—not only resolving the individual cases of hardship but eliminating all potential for abuse by reinterpreting the basic principle that a husband has an absolute right in Jewish divorce. Each of us here has different issues, and we have come together in great strength to learn together and to deliberate.

But our numbers here today mean something else as well: that we have a job to do, not only concerning women's lives but also placing a protective fence around *halakhah*. Yes, we must help to rescue individual women suffering inequity; yes, we must enable women to be the best practitioners of Judaism they can possibly be. But, in these processes that involve reinterpretation of the law, we are also working to ensure that *halakhah* remains connected to ethics, justice, mercy, compassion.

Some would say, as I have heard often during these past two decades in response to the plea to accommodate women's needs, that *halakhah* and justice or *halakhah* and ethics have little to do with each other, that *halakhah* is a system which doesn't take individual human feelings into consideration. Rather, it is focused on a grand design for society.

On this latter point I fully agree; this is a proper reading of the sources. Every bit of minutiae, every tiny detail is precious to us not only because it represents faithfulness to Torah but also because it was—is—intended to communicate a value, an overarching principle about human life, Jewish life. But we must look at the even larger a picture of

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halakhah—and recognize that these overarching principles, taken altogether, are for the purpose of creating a just society in the service of God and Torah. That is the grand design of *halakhah*. Thus, when the system abandons an *agunah*, as it does now when it could just as easily make a valid halakhic decision to protect her; when it restricts a woman when it could just as easily find a precedent or principle or scriptural peg to include and spiritually uplift her; then those who hold the interpretive keys in their hands have allowed *halakhah* to fail its own mission.

We are taught that we are a community of individuals created in the image of God. What does that mean? The Talmud explains: *mah hu rachum*, . . . ; just as God is merciful, so you be merciful, forgiving, act with lovingkindness. The tradition teaches us to have pity on the widow and orphan, this is Torah, this is *halakhah*, this is how God treats human creatures. The Mussar movement said it best: "The Torah came to make a mensch." No, there is no authority on earth that can prove to me that *halakhah* and justice are not connected, in women's issues as in every other area of life. I can bring a thousand proofs otherwise from Torah and Talmud.

So when we are told by some, "sorry, some *agunot* just can't be helped," or "too bad you feel victimized or humiliated in this or that aspect of the tradition; there is nothing that can be done," we must then press to take another look, we must press forward with another claim upon *halakhah*. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, z"l, wrote that each person has a *shlichut*, a mission in life, and the key is to determine what that *shlichut* is. I believe that part of the *shlichut* of Orthodox Jewish women of today is to protect *halakhah* from being disconnected from its overarching principles. There are many sessions at this conference about many matters of *halakhah*, for as Orthodox women and men, that is what we are about. My hope is that as we enter into these deliberations, we will also keep in mind the larger principles of *halakhah* and the special *shlichut* that we have.

Finally, what these numbers and this outpouring are about is a new role for modern Orthodoxy. On the one hand, the last thing anyone in the world needs is another organization or committee or conference. On the other hand, perhaps the world needs another modern Orthodox enterprise, organized around women's issues, one that stands for very particular and unique values. Modern Orthodoxy is a definable community, with its heart and soul and feet in the inherited tradition and with its ears open to contemporary society, embracing and integrating the best values of modernity and rejecting the least of them. As such, we serve as a bridge community to the rest of the Jewish world, right and left, as a model of living modernly while anchored to tradition; as a model even to non-Jews as we embody the values of Torah. What we are about here today is not only the immediate needs and issues of women in Orthodoxy, but a voice that speaks at many other levels and to many other issues. It is my hope that soon all the problems and needs of Orthodox women will be met, and when that happens, and perhaps even before, we will not fold our tents and go home, but rather add . . .

reasoned voices to others in the community, contribute energies, now taken up with *agunot* and women's *tefilah*, toward the burning issues of our generation—building bridges amongst our people in this terrible time of disunity, working toward a safe peace in Israel, concerning ourselves with the environment, helping the underdogs and victims of society. In doing so, we will add the power of one more group of Orthodox women to the real task of our people—that of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world.

Women's Voices in Holocaust Literary Memoir

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Holocaust literary memoirs by women reveal distinct gendered differences in the experience of men and women in Nazi concentration camps. These differences are the result of obvious biological differences (e.g., childbirth, menstruation), as well as subtle socially derived differences (e.g., household and mothering skills), which simultaneously disadvantaged and empowered the women. While women's literary memoirs unequivocally demonstrate the inherent perversity of Nazism, they also evoke issues that spark controversies related to gender-based analyses. As in other literary memoirs, women's memoirs raise the persistent challenge of art to express the unimaginable and unthinkable.

*All sorrows can be borne if you put them
into a story or tell a story about them*
Isak Dineson

In the very center of her memoir, *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grottesque Land*, Sarah Nomborg-Przytyk captures one of the essentials of the Final Solution. As she watches women and children disembark from a transport and pass "in review before the searching eyes of Mengele," she recalls an African colony described in a book by Henry Sienkiewicz, *The Desert and the Wilderness*. She comments:

When two warring African tribes were engaged in a life and death struggle, the women and children were placed in a sheltered colony where they were completely safe and none of the combatants was permitted to enter. The women and children of both tribes were beyond the hate of the opposing tribes. Here in Auschwitz the German thugs murdered women and children first.¹

In her poetic memoir, Charlotte Delbo also explores the nexus of literature, Holocaust, and gender and exposes the Nazi perversion of "women and children first."² Nomborg-Przytyk and Delbo suggest that we are dealing with a subject—the Holocaust—that is unique among mass murders and genocides not only for the reasons that Steven T. Katz and others have laid out but for other reasons as well.³ That is, the Nazis created an

¹Sara Nomborg-Przytyk, "Children," *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grottesque Land* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), pp. 79–80.

²Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After* (New Haven: Yale, 1995), pp. 3–114.

³Steven T. Katz, *The Holocaust in Historical Context* (New York: Oxford), 1994.