

How will a broad coalition of feminists inspire and transform the religious, cultural, emotional, and intellectual demeanor of Jewish life?

Orthodox Feminism and the Next Century

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On numerous occasions over the past years, I've been asked: how far can Orthodoxy go in responding to feminism? Sometimes there's a bit of goading behind the question: What do Orthodox feminists really want? What's your real agenda? But often the questioner comes with genuine interest. How far can Orthodoxy accommodate the needs of the new Jewish woman without losing its Orthodoxy?

There are also myriad specific questions: Will every girl in the community be expected to study Talmud? Will Orthodox women become rabbis, make halachic decisions as *yotzot*, advisors, or *poskot*, decisors? Will they be *dayanot*, judges in the rabbinic courts of law, presiding over matters of divorce? Will the gendered language of the prayerbook undergo transformation or will the original language be preserved, with commentary and caveat sensitive to *kavod hatzibbur*, the honor (of women) in the congregation? And most of all, who will prepare for Pesach? (Just kidding.)

These are but a few of the questions that grow naturally out of a 30-year engagement of feminism and Judaism. Some of these questions I would like to have answered. Others upset my Orthodox equilibrium, although they may seem legitimate to some Orthodox

women whose thinking has gone beyond mine.

So the future scenario is unclear. If the changes that have been wrought during the past decades are any indication, the element of surprise may be a surer bet than any predictions I might offer. Who would have imagined 30 years ago Orthodox

women studying and teaching Talmud in places like Drisha or Midreshet Lindenbaum? Who would have believed that women would serve on Israeli religious councils, or as congregational interns in Orthodox shuls? Who would have pictured a woman reading the Torah portion at a women's *tefillah* group?

When I was growing up in the 1940s and 1950s, even the word *bat mitzvah* was off-limits

in Orthodoxy, signaling the celebrant as Reform or Conservative. Today, no self-respecting modern Orthodox family would refrain from marking its daughter's Jewish maturity with a *bat mitzvah* celebration. While changes in Orthodoxy may not seem as stark as changes in the more liberal denominations, they are more remarkable in some ways because they represent a greater shift from the status quo. In only one generation, Orthodox women's

How will these changes affect relationships, the family, definitions of sexuality, and Jewish values?

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roles have shifted from exclusively private to increasingly public, from the household and *mikvah* to houses of study and prayer, and religious courts of law.

The extent to which change will occur in the coming decades depends on a number of variables above and beyond the to-be-determined agenda of Orthodox feminists. Not the least of these variables is the attitude of the large body of mainstream women in the Orthodox community. While the numbers of Orthodox feminists (including those who eschew the label) have grown, the majority of Orthodox women remain skeptical or antagonistic, even though they have integrated gender equality values into all other aspects of their lives — their relationships, educational goals, and professional work.

In addition to a desire for change, there must also be a willingness to work for change. The fact that the *agunah* is still an unresolved issue is due, in part I believe, to the fact that Orthodox women (and men) are not demanding that halachists end such injustice through reinterpretation and repair of this law.

In addition to activism, many Orthodox women remain diffident about adopting new and unfamiliar roles. I understand this because, although I advocate expanded roles, I too sometimes feel an inner, emotional resistance to the unfamiliar. Rabbis report that when they offer women in their congregations *hakafot*, dancing with a Torah scroll on Simchat Torah, many refuse due to unease or fear. While this is natural given the centuries of conditioning, it is surprising to find that this resistance cuts across generational lines.

Another factor in determining future change is the ability of a community to distinguish between public policy/community sensibility and halachic prohibition. Currently, the lines are blurred. Or perhaps not so blurred. Often I've heard the following rabbinic *p'sak*: "It's not against *halachah*, but it's not something we do." While this may be the answer of the moment, distinguishing between *halachah* and community sensibilities opens the door to future reevaluation. New policies will only emerge from new educational programs, when models for articulating these issues and pressure from feminists move the community forward.

A third variable in determining the pace and extent of change is evidence. Although ultimately we want what is best for Judaism and best for women, it may take time to discern exactly where this conver-

gence lies. How will the changes affect relationships, the family, the ways we raise our children, the definitions of sexuality, and ultimately the Jewish future? What is the staying power of women in traditionally nurturing roles? Perhaps biology counts for more than feminism has allowed, and there is a reason that society has not restructured itself to accommodate the new ideology. We are the first generation to write the book on new gender relations, and we want to write and read it at the same time.

Oddly, I feel a measure of comfort in not knowing. Years ago I thought everything had to be equal; that less than equal meant sexism, discrimination, hierarchy, and disability. I now believe that distinctive roles can be compatible with equality and equal dignity, and that not everything in life has to be taken to its logical conclusion. Perhaps Orthodoxy may turn out to be the best testing ground for a theology of distinctive-but-equal gender roles. However, to serve as a credible model, Orthodoxy cannot be separate and unequal, neither in reality nor perception. With the exception of the *agunah* problem, which as an outright abuse and violation of Jewish ethics should have been resolved yesterday, the slow time frame of Orthodox decision making may be advantageous to all society.

The path that this journey — the transformation of Orthodoxy by feminism and the modulation of feminism under the impact of eternal Jewish values — will take is a function of the interplay between halachists, the lay community, and the sincere petitioning of feminists within Orthodoxy. Judaism has often adapted to innovations based on the dynamic interchange between individual needs and community sensibilities, between the questions and the answers in the halachic literature, between new societal norms and ancient traditions. The full dignity of women, as images of God, is an external idea that we must integrate into our heritage.

Orthodox feminists can add our voices, our pleas for change, without worrying that we are too radical or too reactionary. Even as we press forward with our issues, we feel the reassuring cushion of community and *halachah* all around us, and we are emboldened to speak the truth, without fear.

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