Searching for A Woman's Voice in Responsa Literature

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This paper will address and illustrate the problems and process of investigating women's religious lives by using Jewish legal texts known as responsa. The most significant problem with legal texts is that women's voices are not heard. In terms of responsa specifically, women ask the questions and live with the decision, but they do not create and have no part in the creation of the legal text. As a test case, I will explore a series of responsa written by Rabbi Moses Feinstein, attempting to lift the veil of silence that covers these women. The women do not talk directly to us; but their condition does. The methodological question remains: how much of women's voice do we hear; how much can we claim to be suggestive of their situation and experience.

Spurred by contemporary theories of knowledge, modern historians and philosophers are seeking the particular and the personal in their representation of human civilization. This endeavor has focused on sources such as autobiographies, as the voice of the individual reveals the sought-after story of human distinctiveness. This focus on the personal has been decisively advanced by feminist scholarship. The re-discovery of female distinctive involvement in history has re-shaped our understanding and appreciation of human culture.[1] The process has been both fruitful and formidable.

Much of history has been written without women. Even before the historical task of gathering, selecting and evaluating material is begun, women are silenced. We seldom hear their stories: few wrote and fewer still were published.[2] Symptomatically, they do not even appear in many of the foundational texts of communities. Feminist scholars are challenging these androcentric texts; at best finding them irrelevant, at worst insidious.[3] The critique is systemic and profound.

[1]Distinguished examples in the study of women's Jewish religious experience include the work of such scholars as Natalie Zemon Davis, Bernadette Brooten, Susan Sered, and Chava Weissler.

[2]This is especially true of Jewish history. Excluding Glickl's famous journals, we have few personal memoirs or autobiographies. We do have other sources such as letters, wills, and songs, but the use of these documents is still underdeveloped.

[3]See Leonard Gordon, "Toward a Gender Inclusive Account of Halakhah," in T. M. Rudavsky, ed., *Gender and Judaism*, (New York University Press, 1995), pp. 3–12.

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Consequently, feminist theorists have been struggling with questions of sources and resources in the quest for women's voices. Many have refused to use the traditional sources available. Others have made great headway—such as the current achievements in feminist biblical studies. But the questions remain; can we hear from women or learn about their lives by using texts in which women are silenced? Information about women's lives, social facts, have been accumulating. However, many of these resources are embedded in male-authored texts.[4] The quest for a woman's voice, for her self-representation, complicates and confounds the task. It is of course ironic to search for a woman's voice in a tradition that bans the (singing) voice of a woman for fear of its affect on men. Recognizing these difficulties, this paper will address and illustrate the problems and process of investigating women's religious lives by using Jewish legal texts known as responsa.[5]

The problem with legal texts is multifaceted. Most significantly, women's voices are not heard. Rachel Biale, writing about Jewish law in general, aptly compared the process to a birth.[6] Women may be present in the prenatal and postpartum stages but they are conspicuously absent at the birth itself. In terms of responsa specifically, women ask the questions and live with the decision, but they do not create—and have no part in the creation of—the legal text.

Judith Plaskow lists three objections to law as a medium for the feminist scholar and activist alike.[7] First, the content of the legal material is systematically problematic. Women are often objects within this system.[8] They are also treated as a nondistinguishable group.[9] Significantly, male experience is the defining norm.[10] Furthermore, the lists of exemptions and obligations privilege men and create a community of practitioners in which only men are the ritual experts and women do not participate fully in the life

[4]"To learn what Italian Jewish women thought, said, and did before the modern period, one must study the writings of male authors." Howard Adelman, "Finding Women's Voices in Italian Jewish Literature," in Judith Baskin, ed., *Women of the Word* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), p. 50.

[5]Responsa, as the word implies, are responses to questions that people ask of their rabbis. Major rabbinic decisions become the hallmarks of the law as lived and are established as precedents for future generations. This format is a major source of individuated Jewish law for the past one thousand years.

[6]*Women and Jewish Law* (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), p. 3.

[7]In "Halakha as a Feminist Issue" (*The Melton Journal*, Fall 1987), pp. 3–5. This discussion is repeated in her book *Standing Again at Sinai* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), pp. 60–74.

[8]In *Chattel or Person*, Judith Romney Wegner explores and adjusts aspects of this statement.

[9]TB Shabbat 62a; נשים עם בפני עצמן הן; women are a people unto themselves.

[10]See Susannah Heschel, ed. *On Being A Jewish Feminist* (New York: Schocken, 1983).

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of the community. Moreover, much of the content does embrace men's views of women's religious lives. Obviously, for many, the greatest impediment for feminist Jews is in this arena of the content of the law. But in curious ways that is the easiest to address. Since the legal system is diverse, flexible and responsive, many of these issues can be rectified or addressed in today's language and terms, using women's experience to pry open the system. But that is not my concern here. The problematic stated is whether it is possible to "glean" from these sources the voices and experiences of women themselves.

The next level of critique is theoretical, questioning whether law is a woman's style of dealing with life. Interestingly, many feminists agree with Judith Plaskow's suggestion that law may not be women's mode of operation and, therefore, is not an arena for feminist attention or transformation. In the recent *Feminist Perspective on Jewish Studies* there is not one mention of responsa and no section on Jewish law.[11] I find this an essentialist and misleading tactic. All social systems are based on legal systems. Women work and live in societies based on rules. We need to attend to that legal heritage. Evidently, in this discourse, women do practice within the system, and it is their voice that I am trying to un-re-dis-cover. Interestingly, I find the responsa system specifically indicative of women's use of law. There still remain issues of choice, but it is obvious that the women who ask these questions of their rabbis accept rabbinic authority within the hierarchy of a legal process.

As noted above, the final objection is to the structure of the legal process itself. Women have not historically been either the creators or agents of legal formation. No women are present in or represent the tradition. Feminist critique points to issues of access and agency. Do women make the law—directly or indirectly?

Rather than focus on the exclusion of women or assume their inclusion,[12] I have tried to use these androcentric texts to better explore the effects of patriarchy on women, to claim the center for women, and to give women access to a domain that directly or indirectly impinges on their lives. These legal resources are social artifacts and can give us partial entry to the lives of various women. I consider this challenge part of the effort to further the contemporary scholarly investigation of women's religious lives, functions and positions in traditional contexts.[13]

[11]Lynn Davidman and Shelly Tenebaum, eds., *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). The chapter on rabbinics is focused on talmudic studies. This oversight reflects the general trend in Judaic studies.

[12]See for example Leonard Gordon in Rudavsky, *Gender and Judaism*.

[13]There are a number of scholars using responsa literature to locate women in Jewish social history. See the works of Tal Ilan and Ruth Lamdan.

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Consequently, in this paper I intend to listen for women's voices however diluted or silenced in responsa. What questions do the women ask, what can we cull about the conditions of their lives and the circumstances under which they seek rabbinic decisions? What kind of stories are imbedded in these questions and answers?

Admittedly, the direct search for a woman's voice and perspective in these texts yields very little. Nonetheless, one can find clues that are worthy of further investigation. In many of these texts we can see the pressures that arise in a woman's daily life and begin to understand her religious existence. In contemporary responsa, we can witness the dynamic tension between tradition and modernity and the way that is interpreted for some women.

The responsa of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein prove a rich hunting ground for this exploration. Responsa are first and foremost non-transferable answers to specific individuals. Listening for the questioner in the answers of Rabbi Feinstein is the challenge. Rabbi Moses Feinstein (1895–1986) was known as one of the "giants" of this generation. Though born and educated in Eastern Europe, he worked from 1937 until his death in New York city where he became a central figure in the development of (American) Orthodoxy. His decisions are continually cited even after his death. In his seven-volume *Iggerot Moshe*,[14] there are hundreds of answers to questions posed by women. In these responsa texts, we can hear the strained, muted, and veiled voice of women in trouble. Their questions and Feinstein's carefully modulated responses reveal aspects of women's lives rarely glimpsed.

The texts chosen reveal women in a variety of life situations. The first responsum to be examined is a request for permission to use birth control. Having many children has left this couple without patience for the newest baby. The mother fears her reactions to another child. Feinstein's response acknowledges the realities of her life and does not ignore her distress. It is through his answer that we hear of her pain and urgency. Given the conventional emphasis placed on women, child bearing, and family stability, a number of interesting responsa relating to women at work give clear indication of a significant presence and of his endorsement of women in the work force. One specifically involves a woman who has had an office affair. Again we hear only Feinstein's response. Yet in that answer there is suggestive information about this woman, her work environment, and her religious agitation. In the next responsum, a well-known case, Feinstein allows a widow to replace her husband as a *mashgiach*. Finally, and surprisingly, he allows a widow to go to work with her head uncovered.

The women do not talk directly to us; but their condition does. Feinstein's sensitivity to their plight, and the absence of harsh condemnation or moral righteousness, possibly indicate his familiarity with these types of problems if not with the

[14]An eighth volume was posthumously published by his family.

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women themselves. The methodological question remains; how much of women's voice do we hear; how much can we claim to be suggestive of their situation and experience.

Birth control is a very complex matter in Jewish law. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein's many decisions take into consideration medical facts, personal histories, and legal principles. In these responsa, we learn of women who are in need of help, whose nerves are frayed, for whom having another child represents an unbearable burden. These are the pious women of whom one might say, "Baruch Ha'Shem, not so good."[15] They turn to Rabbi Feinstein in the hope of legal relief so that they may gain respite and some sense of control over their lives.

One case from 1978 (*IM* EH 4:68), describes a parent's distress that leads to physical violence. In this document, the father writes that his wife (and even he himself) is experiencing great difficulty and pain in raising their children. This has led to beatings. Feinstein is quick to respond that they should treasure the gift of life while underscoring that the hitting can only be the result of a nervous illness. Once the case is presented in terms of an illness, he is able to recommend the healing of birth control for a limited time. Thus, permission is given for a diaphragm for two years. At the end of that period, he hopes they will have come to their senses and appreciate the gift of life.

This text is typical of many birth control responsa. Strikingly, the question is not written by the woman. In an earlier decision (*IM* EH 4:67, 1961), Rabbi Feinstein responds to the husband, but it is clear that the woman wrote the letter. As in the above-mentioned case, permission[16] is given but the nature of the problem is not disclosed—only that there is a fear of danger. However, we are told that the woman's own letter indicates that she has reverence of God (יראה א ת ה שי"ת), is trustworthy (נאמנת בדבריה) and is modest (צנועה במעשיה). Her voice is hinted at but absent. Her letter obviously was impressive and gave proof of her reliable characteristics. This text is evidence of a pious (חרדי)[17] woman's interaction with her rabbinic authority. In distress, she writes to him directly, prepared to accept his authority. In turn, he accepts her word and does not question her truthfulness or her description of the danger. Her testimony stands. Yet her voice is erased. He follows age-old traditions and responds to her husband. Significantly, the only condition of this responsum is that she not tell her friends. In keeping the lines of authority clear, Rabbi Feinstein requires her continued silence, so that no woman would decide to apply this decision to herself. He

[15]See an article with that title by Janet Wolf in *Jewish Life* (Spring 1982), pp. 47–53.

[16]Permission is for the use of a "rubber"—a diaphragm; the pill is seen as still too problematic on a number of levels. In *IM* EH 3:24 he gives permission for use of the pill.

[17]This is Feinstein's descriptive word.

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warns the couple, not just the woman, that this is an issue of modesty and that they must keep it private. He then publishes the decision in his seven-volume collection.

In the responsum on parental beatings, the woman's difficulties are more clearly rendered. The woman (and her husband) finds herself burdened with raising their children. She is pregnant again. Distressed, saddened, and without patience, they both hit the children. Consistently, Rabbi Feinstein is willing to listen to the difficulties that women have. He focuses only on the woman; extends his acceptance and support to include her emotional anguish as well as direct physical dangers. She suffers from an illness of "nerves." Thus, while berating the use of physical violence, he declares that safe methods of birth control[18] must be used to keep the children safe and the mother herself out of danger. His description of her life in a few short sentences is poignant. There are a number of such cases in *Iggerot Moshe*. The women are described as suffering from deep sadness and depression. With him we can hear their pain and suffering. For some having many children is an unbearable burden. But we do not know their names or any biographical details. Reading the marriage manuals of the Orthodox community, one would never infer or presume that there were such difficulties. In these responsa, we recognize reality. We also are forced to look at the women, no matter how hidden. They are the ones directly involved and affected by the decision. Remarkably, it is the women's condition and need that Feinstein is attentive to, not their husbands', even though he only responds to the men.

If it is difficult for some women to imagine asking for permission to use birth control, the next text poses a greater challenge. In *IM* OH 4:117 (1975), a woman confesses to having had an "office affair." One of the considerations in this kind of research is to appreciate a woman's willingness to disclose the most intimate aspects of her life to her male rabbinic authority. There are a number of responsa in which women confess their sexual indiscretions and ask for guidance from Rabbi Feinstein.[19] This text is uncommon in that the woman's own words are quoted. She writes of having engaged in intimate acts with her boss before she was married. The affair took place over a six-month period. Four years after her marriage, she is still working as a secretary for the same man. She is also still agonizing over her transgression. In her letter which atypically Feinstein quotes, she writes: "God is my witness, I will never return to those sins. My heart is broken and shattered because of this matter." This is a pious woman's voice, tortured and full of remorse. It is also a testimony in her own words of her full repentance. She admits her sin and pledges to desist from any future encounter. Significantly for Feinstein, she has endured four Yom Kippur Day atonements. Yet, she is not tranquil. Rabbi Feinstein, trusting her testimony, seeks to calm and heal her; to

[18]Diaphragm plus foam. He prohibits the I.U.D.

[19]Some men and women even ask his permission to diet.

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bring peace to her soul (נשמה). Her penance cannot be public or physical, according to him, for she has a role and job to do in her family. So he prescribes a structured series of daily petitional prayers and recitation of psalms to strengthen her faith and reinforce her awareness of God's watchful presence. Her transgression remains undisclosed to other humans. He subsequently assures her that on the next Yom Kippur she will be completely forgiven and blessed. He encourages her to feel joy for all she has merited and to banish her sorrow. In a most intriguing addendum, Feinstein advises her that when she raises daughters she should make sure that they do not work in offices like hers so that they should not be tempted.

In this text, we learn a good deal about a certain woman (and a lot more about the rabbi she turns to). We know that this woman has to work and that is part of her normal and accepted life. Even though she might wish to escape from her work environment, she does not and it is significantly never asked of her. We now know that sometimes a woman who is pious can transgress and that the work place is vulnerable but not prohibited. We know that no one group is immune to sexual violations. We know that a sexual sin has caused this woman personal agony for many years. We recognize that this woman, like many others, feels able to disclose her innermost thoughts and fears to a distant rabbi. We also know that she sought and received a remedy from him. In this case we hear her particular voice because the rabbi involved wished us to understand her suffering. Unusual for this type of data, we catch a glimpse of her own self-presentation and personal experience. Yet, she is still anonymous and we do not know if this program of prayers and meditations heals. We do not know of her life in its fullness, only of her transgression and her suffering.

One of the interesting facets of this text is his acceptance of her place in the work force. Despite the severity of her transgression, Rabbi Feinstein never suggests she leave her place of employment. His advice about future daughters and employment is baffling, since he invariably supports women working especially when in financial need. Thus, in two controversial texts (*IM* YD 2:44,45), he declares that a woman can succeed her husband and become the *mashgiach*, the ritual supervisor, having authority in matters of *kashrut* for a major food producer. In this particular case, the woman in question is a widow in desperate need of the salary in order to survive. Again we hear of a woman in trouble, but in his initial responsum he clears the way for a woman to be a wage earner even in such a male-dominated field. When he is attacked in a popular journal for his position, he meticulously and extensively defends himself and this decision.

The second text is the strongest display of legal resources allowing women to assume positions of ritual responsibility and authority. Significantly, the woman's capabilities are assumed. There is no echo of a doubt that she can function skillfully as a supervisor. Feinstein accepts that she knows all the necessary laws. After all, her husband did. The ability to inherit her husband's job seems to intimate that she also

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inherited or shared his knowledge of that job. However, he does not choose to promote women as experts in general nor give this woman absolute endorsement. Thus, even though he has presented all the legal texts to permit, and he actually does permit a woman to be a ritual supervisor, he qualifies his ruling. This particular woman inherited her job from her husband. She is a widow and desperately needs the income to survive. Accordingly, this is a case of extenuating circumstances. These limitations on the general applicability of the ruling are topped off by his final compromise. She gets the job—he never questions her expertise—but she is not to be nominally the expert of record.

Since this decision was debated in a public journal, more is known of the woman's biographical data. Researchers can use his two texts as clues in writing a personal story of expertise and experience. The responsa alone are not sufficient, but they are valuable.

As noted, *parnasa*, income, is often sufficient reason for lenient rulings. In *IM* EH 1:57 he allows a widow to work in the public sector without covering her hair. In an unusual note, Feinstein states that he was once asked if a widow could be allowed to work in an office without covering her hair. In this text the woman's voice is even more muted. She needed the job in order to support her children, and it appears to have been a condition of employment. He replied that in a case of great need it was permissible. In this case he is persuaded that her employment and advancement is at risk if she does not dress like the others. A head covering is too conspicuous and, therefore, limiting in the expected conformity of the business world.[20] Significantly, the legal grounds for a widow's head covering are ambiguous. Since she is the sole support of her family, and since for Feinstein financial motives are acceptable, his leniency is understandable.

His ruling is predicated on an understanding of the difficult conditions of life for a widow and the realities of marketplace norms. Her need for the job in order to support her children renders her request and action permissible. This decision is consistent with many others concerning the world of business, in which there is no gender separation. For the sake of business Jews can wear American style clothing (*IM* YD 1:81); men can remove their head covering (*IM* HM 1:93, OH 4:2); widows can remove their head covering (*IM* EH 1:57); and men can dye their hair (*IM* YD 2:61). The widow must support her children. He does not advise her to seek employment elsewhere, nor does he caution her about the slippery slope of immodesty. Her motives are clear, forthright and proper. Feinstein does not doubt her.

One of the unexpected results of this research is an appreciation of the effects of a woman's voice on the decisor and his decision. Feinstein is suspicious of women as a group; their motives are denigrated and requests for greater participation often denied

[20]A married woman must cover her hair no matter what the work place constraints. Presumably, for Feinstein, her income is not the sole support of the family.

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on the basis of intent and not legal permissibility. He does not hear from them as individuals but rather as an anonymous group. His suspicion arises partially from his perspective of the destructive influence of America, the women's liberation movement, and the Conservative and Reform groups that have welcomed changes, especially those that affect and include women. Thus, in some cases, he doubts women's intention (*IM* OH 4:49, OH 2:43); positing unsubstantiated motives that render their requests unacceptable. In *IM* OH 4:49, he notes that even though the women are faithful to the ways of the Torah, their motives emanate from the women's movement, invalidating their request, and he labels them heretics.

However, when Rabbi Feinstein receives a request from or about an individual woman, especially one in distress, he accepts her motives readily. Her voice is heard. As a result, acceptance rather than suspicion is the prevailing standard. In this person-to-person format, lenient rulings are not always found.[21] But responsiveness and compassion are. In this format of responsa, women are individuals whose specific voices are heard and attended to. Significantly, this is one form of legal influence; one arena in which women by asking their questions are affecting the process. Every one of these questions yielded answers that can be used as precedents for other women. Even the private answers concerning birth control become part of the corpus of legal information for future rulings.

It is obvious to this researcher that responsa can inform our understanding of women's lives in many ways. There are innumerable social facts embedded in many of the decisions. Women write frequently and openly. Responsa respond to their lived experiences. Mostly we hear of their troubles and problems. Thus, sometimes responsa literature can offer insight in the feminist search for a woman's voice. It is the meeting ground of archaic legal formula, scholarly distance and male subjectivity, charismatic leadership, individual emergencies and predicaments, and communal need. Filtered through the lens of women's experiences, while factoring in their silence and passivity, responsa literature can offer a revised but partial picture of Jewish women's historical experience.

It is not simply a matter of seeing women in history, but of returning history to women;[22] not just a case of women in Judaism, but placing Judaism in the hands of women also. What will Judaism look like when women are no longer the objects of the law, but become both the agents and creators of that system?[23] Part of the answer lies

[21]Thus, in one request for use of birth control because another child has leukemia, he refuses permission. *IM* EH 4:73, 1981.

[22]The work of Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza exemplifies this position.

[23]In "Halakha as a Feminist Issue," (*The Melton Journal*, Fall 1987), Judith Plaskow raises these questions.

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in our approach to women's historical relationship to Jewish law. As Judith Plaskow notes, after exploring how women have been marginalized and disabled, we must also ask "How have women shaped the law, observed or responded to it, undermined or cherished it, used it to their own ends?"[24] Finding women in our past, giving them credit for roles and action, acknowledging their contributions are all essential parts of looking for a woman's voice in the community's history.

The women may not talk directly to us, but their condition does. Susan Sered has written on women's religious lives from an anthropological perspective. She notes the failure of traditional androcentric historical accounts that relied on text and symbol only. But she also notes the importance of seeking out women's experiences in and relationship to these texts. "Not surprisingly, how Jewish women relate to the great tradition has begun to emerge as a key issue for feminist Jewish anthropologists. . . . The anthropology of Jewish women is the anthropology of women who stand in relationship of some sort (worshipful, antagonistic, creative) to Jewish texts. . . . An anthropology of Jewish women cannot ignore texts, but neither can it be limited by them."[25] This investigation wishes to use these documents to paint a picture of the problems and concerns of women as well as the cultural premises used by the rabbinic leadership in responding to them. The methodological questions remain—how much of a woman's voice do we hear; how can we claim her presence in these texts?

Try as I might I cannot hear the voice of *a* woman in these texts. There is no specific individual that we can know; no name, no biographical data, no narrative. Just the initial situation that compelled a question. And we usually do not even hear her voice in the question. Someone else—male—routinely asks on her behalf, either her husband or rabbi or friend. Furthermore, we do not hear her reaction, or how this decision affected her life. We do not know with what attitude she carried out the decision—nor even if she did. We assume she did; and that is part of our resolution. The women who turn to Rabbi Feinstein do so with full acceptance of his authority over their lives. They are religious, pious women who seek spiritual guidance in difficult times. Thus, we do know something initially about some of the women. Many cannot imagine being on the receiving end of such directives, with no chance to discuss, to react, to respond. But this is not about all women. We do hear of these women's lives, of specific needs and occurrences. If we do not know them individually, we do know about women as distinct personalities, somewhat individuated. They are not silent even though silenced. We can imagine, perhaps, but that is not the historical task. If in responsa texts women are in the shadows, there is a sense of them as being individually

[24]P. 3.

[25]"Toward an Anthropology of Jewish Women," in Maurie Sacks, ed., *Active Voices: Women in Jewish Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), pp. 215–6.

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distinct. Significantly, in these texts women are not an undistinguishable group, and the male experience is not necessarily the defining voice.

There are women who need to work, who want to get ahead in the corporate world. They request to remove wigs or head coverings so that they do not stand out, are not differentiated as religious Jews amongst their peers. These are widows who need work, who are the sole support of their families. Other widows need to take over from their husbands, become officials of *kashrut*. Some women are able, learned and in need.

Some women sin. One is beside herself with remorse. But she needs to keep her job. No mention is made of her leaving her job. She is shown how to live with her angst, how to forgive herself and get on with her life. As expected a number of women turn to him with fertility problems. His decisions on birth control are intricate but always focus on the individual woman. Women who cannot sustain another pregnancy for physical and mental health reasons are heard from. Women who are troubled by the burden of child rearing, who beat their children, who are depressed, a danger to themselves and their living children are central. The inside view of family life with its tensions as well as its strengths is illuminating. Individual women live these lives.

These are sincere women in genuine crises. They turn to their partners or leaders seeking guidance and help. They are conscientious and immersed in their traditional community lives. But they are not stereotypes and their lives are not cliches.

These are the voices we can hear. We can learn a lot about their lives even if we do not know them individually.

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Jam Every Other Day: Reflections on Twenty Years as a Conservative Jewish Feminist

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Twenty-five years ago, a group known as Ezrat Nashim challenged the Conservative movement to provide women with equal access to the religious and educational institutions of Conservative Judaism. While most of the demands made by Ezrat Nashim have now been met, the Conservative movement has by no means achieved the full integration of women into religious life. Moreover, it is unclear how Conservative Judaism has responded to feminism; has the Movement become "engendered" or has it merely allowed women to do those things previously restricted to men? This article explores the impact of feminism on Conservative Judaism from the personal perspective of the author, a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary and an active Conservative Jew.

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice encounters the White Queen and assists her with her toilette. She suggests that the untidy Queen needs a lady's maid.

> "I'm sure I'll take *you* with pleasure!" the Queen said. "Twopence a week, and jam every other day."
>
> Alice couldn't help laughing, as she said, "I don't want you to hire *me*—and I don't care for jam."
>
> "It's very good jam," said the Queen.
>
> "Well, I don't want it *to-day*, at any rate."
>
> "You couldn't have it if you *did* want it," the Queen said. "The rule is, jam tomorrow and jam yesterday—but never jam *to-day*."
>
> "It *must* come sometime to 'jam to-day,'" objected Alice.
>
> "No, it can't," said the Queen. "It's jam every *other* day: to-day isn't any other day, you know."

Poor Alice! The jam may, in fact, be excellent, but she will never find out. She is, in theory, entitled to the jam, but it will always remain just out of reach.

I sometimes think that Jewish feminists are in a position similar to the White Queen's prospective employee. Even when we win some concession, succeed in having some request acknowledged as valid, something always seems to be just out of reach. The jam sits before us on the shelf, but it never finds its way on to the bread. We can look back to yesterday's accomplishments and ahead to the next goal, but we don't feel as if we're reaping the benefits of our work.

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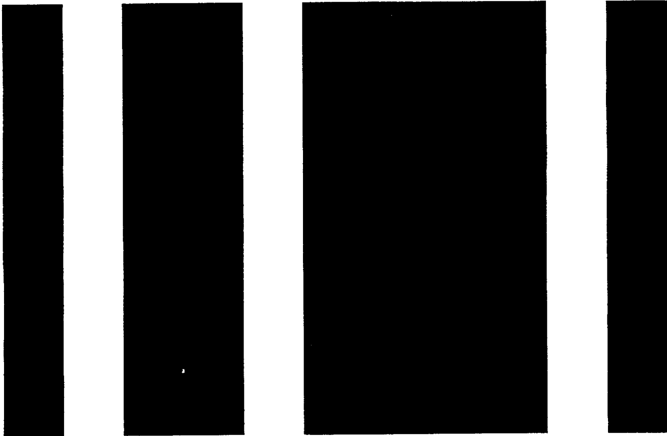

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Integrating Jewish and Feminist Educational Goals

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Recent research has emphasized the central role of Jewish education in forming and maintaining a strong Jewish identity. This essay examines several approaches which integrate intensive Jewish education and feminist goals. While focusing upon specific curricular objectives—women in Jewish history and female biblical figures—, the essay also stresses the use of feminist analysis and contemporary women's scholarship as means to a more gender-equal Jewish educational environment. The challlenges of merging Jewish and feminist educational aims are thus addressed.

Educators whose goals include incorporating feminist analysis into Jewish educational settings face a sobering challenge. Most Jewish educators wish students to gain not only a broad and deep knowledge of, but also to acquire a positive emotional attachment to Jewish history, culture, and texts. Most Jewish educators also value intellectual integrity—and yet many worry that feminist concerns may undermine the respect and affection which students form for Judaic materials.

This essay suggests an approach which accentuates positive and complementary integration of Jewish and feminist goals. The aim of this approach is twofold: first, to focus directly on Jewish women's history and experiences; and second, to apply some principles of feminist analysis to the understanding of classic Judaic materials. The first goal—the reclamation of largely neglected materials within the opus of Judaic texts—is far less problematic than the second, which involves critical thinking. Nevertheless, especially when dealing with adolescent and adult students, both are necessary. Students who do not have the opportunity to analyze Jewish culture using feminist vantage points within a controlled Jewish educational setting will do so in the far less positive—and often openly hostile—settings of college courses or discussion groups. Giving students the opportunity to explore feminist issues in a Judaic-friendly setting is critical in the contemporary world.

Bringing Women's History into the Jewish Classroom

Recent research has revealed that formal Jewish education is the key differential in creating new generations of committed American Jews. Students who attend Jewish supplementary schools or day schools for six or more years become the American Jewish adults most involved in every measurable aspect of Jewish life and activity,

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including ritual observance in the home, membership in Jewish organizations, giving to Jewish philanthropies, seeking out a Jewish milieu, and marrying another Jew. And yet, in addition to all the positive results, Jewish education may also give girls a negative feeling about some aspects of Jewish tradition. When girls and boys sit together in a Jewish studies classroom, the texts they read and the issues they discuss may not be equally relevant to both genders. Within the framework of Jewish schooling, girls may be absorbing something besides a strong Jewish identity. In the worst case scenario, some girls say they "learn" that women do not really count in Jewish history, culture, or life.

In most traditional historical Diaspora Jewish communities, sons were far more likely than daughters to receive formal Jewish education. Although American girls today are about as likely as boys to go to Jewish schools, Jewish school curricula often still reflect the historical male educational orientation. Boys in the Jewish classroom may be more likely to read and hear about characters, ideas, and values which are relevant to their lives, expectations, and experiences. As a result, girls may not see themselves and find role models in classical Jewish texts. They may feel that their religious heritage does not validate them as human beings and provide spiritual frameworks which relate to their lives.

Biblical texts contain such a diverse multiplicity of narratives, legal codes, allegorical and poetic materials, wisdom literature, and horatory homiletics that covering all possible biblical subject matter even in the extensive day school curriculum is virtually impossible. Choices between emphasizing—or even reading—given sections of the Bible in the classroom have always had to be made. What is chosen for study in the contemporary supplementary school or day school curriculum often recapitulates those texts which were chosen by schoolteachers and rabbis in earlier periods of Jewish history. These choices between biblical texts, traditionally made by male teachers of male students, typically focus on narratives about male characters in the Bible, and on lists of behavioral codes which provided the basis and rationale for the complex structure of rabbinic law.

Narratives about biblical men were not only intellectually mastered by students but also absorbed into the informing myths, the emotional intelligence of the Jewish boys who became Jewish men. For example, the biblical Jacob's difficult wanderings through a sometimes overtly and some times subtly hostile world resonated for Diaspora Jewish readers. Jacob was not only renamed Israel but became the symbol of the Jewish people in their own minds. As a people more often than not in positions of subordination or vulnerability, Diaspora Jews could identify closely with Jacob's predicaments and his particular methods for dealing with a destiny which threatened him, his family, and his way of life. God's consoling words to Jacob—"Do not fear, my servant Jacob," *al tirah avdi Ya'akov*, echoed and consoled his descendants.

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Historically, the Jews as individuals and as a nation have often felt that their physical and spiritual survival, like that of Jacob, depended on their battling an unfair destiny with any means at hand. Forbidden to study the Torah, they studied in secret. Barred from agricultural and artisan's guilds, they lent money, collected taxes, and worked as peddlers and middlemen. When Jewish men read and thought and sang about Jacob and Moses and David, their biblical ancestors, they saw their own lives foreshadowed. They identified with the biblical figures, and this identification made their own lives more meaningful and more bearable. They became members of a trans-historical and trans-national Jewish global village.

The Bible also includes substantial materials about women, including biblical narratives about women, poetic materials which deal with allegorical figures of women, and behavioral codes which deal with women. These texts have not been adequately studied or emphasized in traditional Jewish schools—despite the fact that the materials, and even the precedents are there, if one cares to look. Biblical texts provide fascinating female models of cleverness, courage, resilience, and leadership in the characters of Rebecca, Jochebed, Miriam, Hannah, Deborah, Yael, Ruth, Naomi, and Esther.

Some of these women have been highlighted in the yearly cycle of Jewish worship services. On the awesome first day of Rosh Hashanah, Jews traditionally address their creator with such male images as "our Father, our King," but both the Torah and the Haftorah readings tell the vivid, viscerally gripping stories of women who passionately desire to be mothers in Israel and eventually succeed in their goals, against all odds producing a nation and the leaders of a nation. On Purim Jews read the Book of Esther, a fable-like story in which a beautiful woman courageously outmaneuvers a demagogue and saves a nation by her wits. On Passover the service includes the Song of Songs, more than half of whose lyrics express the experiences and emotions of a voluptuous bride; rabbinic interpretation, calling the song of Songs the "holiest of the holies," and forbidding exegetes from stripping it of its immediate human power, explains that the extravagantly female bride represents the Jewish people on their spiritual and historical journey. On Shavuot, the Book of Ruth tells the story of two women upon whom rests the temporal and messianic future of the Jewish people. And on Tisha B'Av, the reading of Lamentations focuses on the destruction of, and the exile from, Jerusalem in the personified figure of a woman—the vivid desolation of Bat Tzion, the princess of Zion.

Similarly, in the Bible, the Deity is often described with anthropomorphic imagery. Most often, the imagery is strikingly male, including images of God as a man of war. However, more often than is commonly realized—and certainly more than is commonly studied in Jewish schools—the biblical God is pictured in clearly feminine imagery. Even day school students are often unaware that the book of Isaiah compares God to a gestating, birthing, and nursing mother, who nurtures the Jewish people. The lessons of female-centered anthropomorphism—and its male counterpart—are that people want to picture a God who meets their needs. When they are fighting fierce enemies, it is

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comforting to picture God as a man of war; when they are desolate, it is comforting to picture God as a mother who will always nurture them and will never forget them.

Other feminine types of imagery abound in biblical texts. Often when God is pictured as the man the entire Jewish people are pictured as a woman, especially in prophetic literature, and their relationship is that of lover and beloved, husband and wife. Familial relationships are common images and reference points in biblical texts, and yet few classrooms concentrate on the meaning, impact, and ramifications of references to beloved children and faithful young wives.

Unfortunately, Jewish schools have seldom focused upon the biblical women in narratives or allegorical, poetical texts; in our classrooms, biblical women are seldom studied as literary characters, religious models, or mythic symbols of the Jewish experience. Jewish educators today face the challenge of reversing these educational lacunas.

This approach does not imply diminishing the significance of texts with ancient authority and deep historical and spiritual significance. Our students must continue to learn about and remember the struggles and wanderings of the Patriarchs who were the fathers of the Jewish people; the dramatic story of Joseph and his brothers; the saga of Moses; the wars and chaos and emerging leadership of the Jewish kingdom(s); Samuel's wisdom and strength and painful double king-making; the heroism, poetry—and poor judgment—of David; the glory and corruptions and brotherly warfare and eventual decline of the Jewish states; the passionate denunciations and consolations of the great prophets, with their lonely but haunting voices.

However, this approach insists that narratives about Jewish women should be accorded deep significance as well. In addition, the approach to women should be one committed to considering them as serious spiritual creatures. For example, when talking about Rebecca, rather than focusing on the episode of the little girl at the well, in which Rebecca plays the ingenue swept away to meet Prince Charming in a kind of Cinderella story, Jewish educators should help the class examine the role of Rebecca as an author of Jewish destiny and the prophetic link between Abraham and Jacob. It is Rebecca, after all, who communicates directly with God, and is informed directly by her Creator of the differences between the children in her womb. It is she—and not her husband the Patriarch—who understands Jacob's innate appropriateness as a spiritual leader of the Jewish people. It is important that Jewish educators not be misled as modern readers by Rebecca's deceptiveness. In biblical literature deceptiveness is an acceptable strategy, as long as one is promoting God's agendas. Indeed, Jacob learns much from his mother about how to manipulate appearances to deal with unfairness.

Similarly, classes can spend more time reading and discussing that unlikely trio of women in Egypt who worked together to deceive and outwit a major patriarchal world power, the infanticidal Pharaoh. Jocebed, Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter, desperately and together, insured that there would be a new generation of Jewish men and a leader

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to take both men and women out of Egypt. The character of Miriam, in particular, lends itself to extended analysis. The class can look at Miriam in various biblical texts and at her treatment in midrashic literature. They can discuss the development of her positive and negative characteristics [promoter of the Jewish family—but gossiping woman], how they are connected, and what they might have meant to commentators at various points in Jewish history.

Older students can talk about differing kinds of female heroism: Rebecca, Tamar, Ruth, Deborah, Esther. They can look at the extraordinary attitudes of the biblical text toward the sexual assertiveness of Tamar, as she confronts the patriarchal power of Judah and is rewarded because she, too, is furthering a divine agenda. Educators can help students explore the parallels between two ancestresses of the Davidic line, Tamar and Ruth, who both take enormous chances. Young adolescents struggling with issues of friendship can explore the transcendent friendship models presented by Ruth and Naomi and David and Jonathan, discussing the parallels in these two sets of relationships. The biblical texts themselves show us the way, providing us with striking parallels between the experiences of Rebecca and her son Jacob, Jocebed and her son Moses, Naomi and Ruth and their descendent David. Jewish classrooms can introduce the concept that the actions of the mothers foreshadow the experiences of their children, *ma'asei imahot siman libanim*, as well as *ma'asei avot siman lebanim*, deeds of the fathers signaling the lives of their sons.

Teaching post-biblical Jewish history and rabbinic texts, the contemporary teacher is virtually forced into dealing with gender issues, to some extent. Fortunately, many useful analyses of gender issues in Jewish history, culture, and societies have been published over the past two decades. The educator can make use of these analyses either in preparation or as a direct text for the class. S/he will also, however, need to be prepared to talk about painful subjects, such as the limits of women's lives in the ancient world. If educators do not talk about these limitations and the heroism of women despite the limitations which surrounded them, students will not acquire the tools which they need to make their rich and richly gendered tradition meaningful.

The role and status of women in rabbinic literature is, of course, a most complicated subject. Negative statements should probably not be totally avoided, because discussing some of them allows the educator to contextualize these materials for the student. Students will almost certainly at some point in their college careers or later reading encounter the Talmudic statement, "He who teachers his daughter [advanced] Torah, it is as if he taught her licentiousness"—but the statement will almost certainly be quoted out of context. By putting Rabbi Meir's admittedly troubling statement back into the original discussion of Sotah, however, students will have the opportunity to talk about gender role construction, the value and implications of marital loyalty, Jewish conceptions of appropriate sexual relationship, historical mistrust of the intellectual

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woman in many cultures [think of the American reaction to Hillary Clinton!], and other significant issues.

While the Talmud contains notably misogynist texts, it also includes some texts which are movingly pro-woman, and these should be emphasized, both because female and male students each need to know that such passages—and the men who created them—are part of the Talmudic heritage, and because of their value as precedents. Educators can, for example, introduce material about Rabbi Ishmael, the towering second-century rabbinic figure who insisted that when women brought a sacrifice in the Temple, the sacrificial animal should be brought around to the *ezrat nashim*, the women's section, so that the woman could participate in the ritual of *semicha*, laying her hands upon and leaning upon the animal involved. Rabbi Ishmael insisted that the concept of a woman's *nahat ruach*, her joyous peace of mind or spiritual satisfaction, necessitated her access to the same sacrificial rituals in which men participated. It is appropriate as well to discuss the description of Rabbi Ishmael's martyrdom in the High Holiday liturgy; he is portrayed as a man so appealing to women that the non-Jewish tyrant's daughter pleaded unsuccessfully with her father to spare Rabbi Ishmael's life. In addition, according to Jewish tradition, when Rabbi Ishmael died, the women of Israel wept, because of his well-known friendship for them.

Equal Opportunity Jewish Education

In certain ways, women have made great strides in terms of Jewish education today. The ubiquitousness of the Bat Mitzvah has had a critical and not always acknowledged side-effect: the celebration of Bat Mitzvah among American Jewish females over the past two decades has virtually erased the gender gap in Jewish education. Before the Bat Mitzvah became popular, one-third of American Jewish women used to receive no formal Jewish education whatsoever; today, the fact that girls, like boys, must prepare for Bat Mitzvah has brought them into supplementary schools and day schools at nearly the same rates as their brothers. Thus, Bat Mitzvah is the link to the formal Jewish education which has emerged as the true "Jewish connection" for American Jewish women today.

Although many opinions in rabbinic law state that intensive formal Jewish education is inappropriate for females, high-level Jewish education for women was actually initiated on a wide scale a century ago, in a daring response to the challenges of secular modernity. Observing that in enlightened societies Jewish women who lacked deep knowledge of Judaic texts might more easily drift away from Jewish lifestyles, Sara Schnirer, a pious Eastern European woman who had been well educated in Germany, established the Bais Yaakov movement, which revolutionized Jewish education for girls. Today, the basic assumptions underlying the formation of the Bais Ya'akov schools have now been accepted by even the most ultra-Orthodox groups in

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the United States: the education of girls is widely viewed as a necessity for the preservation of a traditional Jewish way of life. In day schools ranging from the Satmar school, Bais Rochel, which eliminates the twelfth grade to make sure its graduates cannot attend college, to coeducational Orthodox schools such as Ramaz in New York and Maimonides in Boston, which provide outstanding secular education and teach their boys and girls Talmud together, the crucial necessity for providing girls with a Jewish education has become an undisputed communal priority. During the past decade, it has also become increasingly popular for Orthodox young women to spend a year of religious study in Israeli yeshivot between high school and college. In addition, Stern College for Women, an undergraduate school of Yeshiva University, now offers courses in Talmud, as do a growing number of Orthodox synagogues. Schools which teach adult women biblical and rabbinic texts are proliferating in many locales, under differing denominational and trans-denominational auspices.

The fact that Lubavitch schools still assiduously avoid teaching Talmudic texts to girls masks the little publicized fact that the late Lubavitcher Rebbe stated that women should be taught the Gemara in order to preserve the quality of Jewish life, and in order that the tradition should be passed down from generation to generation. In a Hebrew article, he urges that women be taught the oral Torah so that they, who provide the most consistent presence in the home, can supervise and guide their children's religious studies. They should study with their husbands subjects even including the "fine, dialectical" points of law which most previous rabbis posited as being inappropriate for women. These study sessions are necessary, says Rabbi Schneerson, because without them women can easily be seduced by the charms of secular studies. He says: "It is human nature for male and female to delight in this kind of study. Through this there will develop in them [the women] the proper sensitivities and talents in the spirit of our Holy Torah." Indeed, today in every wing of Judaism from the traditional right to the creative left, advanced schools of Jewish education which either cater to women or are coeducational are flourishing.

Jewish Women's Scholarship

Scholars interested in analyzing the connections between gender, religion, social and historical change, and cultural milieu have explored the history of women in Jewish societies from the Bible onward, and have produced scores of pioneering works on Jewish women in the fields of Bible studies, rabbinics, history, literature, sociology, psychology, and popular culture. These scholarly works have had a significant impact on individual departments, on particular fields, and on Judaic Studies as a whole. Academic women are organized into a Women's Caucus at the Association for Jewish Studies conference, which enables them to more closely attend to each other's works and to supportively share their experiences in the field. Thousands of students each year

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take college courses taught by feminist scholars which focus on women in Judaism. Moreover, not only college and university students have been affected by the ground-breaking writing of Jewish feminist scholars such as Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, Ross Kraemer, Nehama Aschkenasy, Carol Meyers, Susan Niditch, Judith Hauptman, Judith Baskin, Paula Hyman, Marion Kaplan, Deborah Dash Moore, Chava Weissler, and Riv-Ellen Prell, to name just a few representative scholars among many dozens of actively publishing academics. The insights of female academics are slowly being incorporated into Jewish studies curricula for children, teenagers, and adults as well. Each of the major religious groups has devoted time at recent conferences to discussing incorporating gender issues and women's studies into their religious school curriculums, and Brandeis University Women's Studies Program held a conference on "Gender in the Day Schools" (February 1996) which has been expanded into an ongoing national initiative.

Gender Roles in Jewish Laws and Customs

Practical Judaism provides yet another area of educational challenge. Most Jewish classrooms devote some time to Jewish laws and rituals. In making these discussions less gender-driven, educators will not only be sensitive to feminist goals, but will also be dealing with the changing American Jewish household. Given the demographic realities of the contemporary Jewish community, educators should consider freeing the discussion of ritual from non-essential gendering most appropriate in primarily family-structured societies. American Jews today tend to stay single for a long time. If children are taught that Imah lights the Shabbat candles and Abbah makes the kiddush blessing over wine, single Jews often avoid Sabbath rituals until their households fit that particular family constellation. Few non-Orthodox singles make the connection that candles, kiddush, and havdallah belong to every Shabbat regardless of how many or few men and women live in a particular household. Sadly, for many singles years of avoidance mean that a Jewishly active home is in fact never established. Similar concerns sometimes apply to divorced households as well. Divorced women with little girls should be educated to know that they don't need a man to recite kiddush; divorced men should not feel they are compromising their manhood to light Sabbath candles. Ironically, if the creation of "Jewish family values" is an educational goal, teaching rituals in a non-family setting may be the most effective strategy to bringing Jewish families about eventually.

Working Toward Change

The lives and expectations of Jewish women and men today are quite different from those of Jews in earlier periods of Jewish history and in other societies. However, despite change, Judaic study remains a significant Jewish activity. Intellectual activities

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

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