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From Our President A Modest Beginning



By Blu Greenberg

Tzniut! A large and difficult topic for a small newsletter. But we chose it as our theme because it is a primary concept in Judaism; also a key marker of Orthodoxy's sub-groups. On matters of *tzniut* [tznee'oot, modesty] ultras separate from moderns, children outdo parents, and feminists challenge halakha's gender tilt.

The issues are many: women's

head covering and dress; mixed dancing, swimming, seating and handshaking; new public roles for women; *kol isha*; *negiah* (physical expressions of affection during dating); even females shoveling earth over a grave. Each issue further divides: e.g., covering hair — with *tichel* [scarf], snood, hat or wig; exposing x wisps of one's own hair; covering when outside of one's home or inside, as well.

The combinations run like a crazy quilt. Parse this womanstyle: baseball cap [the uniform of young married women), elbow length "tee", jeans, and a *gemara* tucked under her arm — the new Jewish woman. Female surgeons who blaze trails heed *kol isha*. Feminists in women's *tefila* observe *negiah*. Writ large: just as Orthodox women are taking

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Women in Leadership Positions

By Abbie Gottesman and
Esther D. Kustanowitz

At a time in history when women lead multi-billion dollar companies, adjudicate on the Supreme Court, and have held the highest political office in many countries, it is perhaps surprising that more Orthodox women are not taking leadership roles in Jewish organizations. Could this be a function of the psychological mindset of Orthodox women or are *halakhic* principles of modesty at stake? Whatever the reason, the fact remains; the worldwide community leadership of Orthodox Judaism does not proportionately represent its women. Women comprise 51% of the general population; yet, Orthodox women who are involved on a high community leadership level are surprisingly invisible. We have spoken to some of the few who are involved in Orthodox community leadership to gain a better insight into the challenges and rewards of breaking into this traditional male domain.

Adaïre J. Klein has been the Director of Library and Archival Services for the Simon Wiesenthal Center and Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles for the past 21 years. She founded the 40,000 volume library and is responsible for creating a children's book award (Best Book in Diversity and Child Justice) and having it endowed in perpetuity. She is

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Modesty and the Modern Jewish Woman

By Dr. Sylvia Barack Fishman

What is modesty? The Hebrew word *tsanua* can mean modest, humble, simple, austere or small. The Hebrew word *tzniut* has the additional connotation of chastity and morality. The intersection between these two meanings illuminates the very different ways the concept of modesty has been gendered in Orthodox communities today.

Each of these concepts of modesty potentially has genuine value as a corrective to the excesses of contemporary American society.

Today, the half-naked bodies of half-starved girls and women are widely used as marketing tools. Partially as a result, an epidemic of anorexia afflicts middle class Jewish females. Similarly, Americans are obsessed with buying and displaying material goods, to such an extent that many families convert bedrooms into closets—the better to store their "stuff."

Young people raised without firm guidelines and societal norms indulge in ever more extreme masochistic "piercings," in a vain cry for the reestablishment of bound-

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Tzniut

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on more public roles, there is movement toward the opposite pole — of enlarging categories of *tzniut* and putting women back “under wraps”.

Why such paradoxes? Why is *tzniut* so hard to define? Because in its very nature, *tzniut* is dialectical: public and private, absolute and relative, *halakbically* legislated and communally determined. What is absolute for one is culturally relative for another — with *halakbic* support for each position. This explains why many of us can remember a yesteryear of Young Israel dances, mixed gender song pageants at Y.U. and Bnei Akiva, sleeveless bridesmaids dresses, and mixed seating at wedding ceremonies, all with “*bechsher*” of esteemed Orthodox rabbis that their generation-later colleagues would reject.

From a feminist perspective, are

there principles I can extrapolate by which to make judgments? Can I separate out, say, hair covering as a private decision between husband and wife, but keep *kol isba* in the communal box, subject to my charge of muzzling voice and spirit? But what right have I to criticize another sub-community, when mine allows women's song? I know how I bristle when someone scoffs my “excessive, exclusionary” standard of *kasbrut*? On the other hand, if I am respectfully silent, does it mean I condone that which I see as demeaning to women?; and will my own community be next to roll over to a more restrictive stance? Is there a domino effect here, an attitude that spills over into collective perceptions that ultimately affect my life? Where do I draw the line between criticism and respect, between personal choice and anarchy?

These dilemmas suggest two tasks: First — to create an atmosphere of live and let live, mindful that there are many gradations of modesty in Orthodoxy. *Halakba* is normative, but allows some latitude here for personal packaging. Differences should not be used to delegitimize whole groups or belittle another's choices.

Secondly, within a climate of mutual respect, we should open a dialogue on *tzniut*. This will help us to discover where a convergence, if any, lies between public and private, absolutist and relativist positions. We will hear the whole

range of *balakbic* views, and become aware of how modern values intersect with the sources. These exchanges might be tough-minded and not likely to alter behavior. But like all good dialogue, they should increase understanding and generate affinity rather than divisiveness.

In these discussions, account will surely be taken of the new contextual modesty emerging in society today, where women and men mix naturally in workplace and academe. The heightened erotic consciousness that comes from separation fades as male and female become used to each other's presence. Feminine qualities such as voice, body and hair become less the focus, and woman is seen in her fullness as a human being, with a mind, talents and spiritual essence.

Still, *tzniut* is a great value, high on a list of Jewish traits by which we all want to define our lives. I can think of no lovelier compliment than to describe one as a “*hatznealeches*” (Micah 5:8), a person who walks with modesty, with God, through life. I grew up in a home of modest parents. I value this quality in my family and friends. Although I can't easily articulate its attributes, I know that an authentic modesty — past, present and future — goes beyond the length of a sleeve, size of a *tichel*, or voice of a woman. The real task of *tzniut*, then, is to focus on the inner core, the whole person. Somehow, all the trappings, this way or that, will fall into place. ■

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The New Jewish Woman

Ellen Levitt

New and Noteworthy

NEW YORK

Civic Center Synagogue — The **Women's Group of Civic Center Synagogue** meets for study on the first Shabbat of each month; after *kiddush*. The Women's Group is hosting a lecture series this winter. The first lecture was on Dec. 20 and the speaker was Anat Hoffman of Women of the Wall. The documentary film "Women of the Wall" by Faye Lederman was screened. The event was sponsored by U.S. Israel-Women to Women. For information about *tefilla* and non-*tefilla* meetings as well as other Women's Group events, or to be put on the phone/mailling/e-mail list, call the Civic Center Synagogue, 212-966-7141. Website: www.civiccetersynagogue.org.

NEW JERSEY

Recently Cherry Hill held its first women's *tefilla* at the

home of Carolyn Hochstadter Dicker. Another is planned for February or March, followed by one in June and then Simchat Torah. For information about future meetings, contact Carolyn at 856-779-1373 or e-mail her at chdicker@klehr.com.

BOSTON

The undergraduate women of Harvard Hillel are holding a national collegiate conference for undergraduate Jewish women on March 10-12, 2000, entitled "Jewish Superwomen: Living in Two Realms." "At this conference, current and future "Jewish Superwomen" will discuss the contradictory choices modern Jewish women face in determining the course of their lives. The lectures, panel discussions, workshops, and personal interactions scheduled throughout the conference will call attention to the vibrant possibilities for Jewish women to lead fulfilling Jewish lives. Currently the conference is only open to undergraduate

Jewish women. The registration fee is \$36, which includes food and housing. For information on speakers and events, see <http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/~hrhillel/superwomen/>.

ZURICH

A conference on feminism and Orthodoxy is being planned for Zurich, Switzerland in late Spring. Contact: Hzaidner@compuserve

LONDON

An independent minyan with a separate Torah reading for women, modeled on Kehilat Yedidya in Jerusalem, has been founded in North-West London (Edgware/Stammore) by two families who are members of Yedidya. At the service, women can recite *kaddish*, give *drashot*, and wear *tallit* if they wish to. The *mebitza* runs down the middle rather than from side to side. Four services have been held so far (Shavuot, *Parshat Pinchas*, Simhat Torah and *Parshat Vayeshev*). For details on future services, phone 0181-958-8098, or e-mail at lnguthartz@fdn.co.uk. ■

Women in Leadership Positions

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a past officer and board member of Beth Jacob Congregation, where she is co-chair of the education committee. Among her numerous other community involvements, she is an adjunct faculty member at Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion, is actively involved in *Shirat Chanah* (the local women's *tefilla* group), and is a member of her community's *chevra kadisha* (burial society).

At Beth Jacob, she recalls a board meeting where the issue of a woman holding the presidency came under discussion. Someone said, "A woman can't be president of the *shul* because the president has to sit on the *bima* on Shabbat morning." Although Klein challenged this, maintaining that the ability to sit on the *bima* should not be a pre-requisite to becoming president, the *shul* has not yet had a female president. "For change to happen, rabbis and educators have

to be very open about what *halakha* allows women to do and see ways to involve women in Jewish communal life. It's easier to just say 'no, it is not allowed' than it is to seek out the real answers." Klein noted that Jewish institutional life seems to have accepted that men

"A woman can't be president of the *shul* because the president has to sit on the *bima* on Shabbat morning."

should be the leaders. Younger women have to be encouraged to become involved.

Lisa Micley, the first female president of Congregation Shaarei Tefilla in Newton, MA, has felt the support of her community and her family since she assumed her leadership position. Before her presi-

dency began, she was a *shul* vice president for two years, and was the chair of the Shabbaton committee, the chair of the Youth Committee, and the chair of the *Chesed* Committee. Having recently attended a meeting of the Parents' Council of the local synagogues, she noted that while she was not the only woman president, she was the only woman president of an Orthodox *shul*. "I hope the community just views me as president, that I am appreciated and put under the microscope just like any other president would be," Micley said. "I think that other women have not assumed the presidency because of the huge time and energy commitment. Many men have stopped short of the presidency for the same reason."

The time factor was also very important for Debbie Schultz, one of six vice presidents at B'nai David Judea in Los Angeles. On the board of directors for eight years, and a member of the executive board for four years, she notes that her *shul* "goes out of its way" to include

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“For Your Voice is Sweet...” An Overview of Kol isha

By Mia Diamond Padwa

Is a woman's voice sexually stimulating to men? And if so, does her voice need to be silenced in order to enable men to carry on their business undistracted? That there may be a halakhically endorsed silencing of a woman's singing, or even speaking voice, has been under discussion since the time of the Talmud. To many contemporary Orthodox women and to those outside of the Orthodox community, this silencing must seem stifling. Yet as women who seek equality within the parameters of Jewish law we must first understand the law before we can engage the matter from a personal and communal standpoint.

There are three places in the Talmud, each in a different tractate and distinct narrative context that seem to imply that possibility. Any discussion of a possible prohibition of kol isha (literally, the voice of a woman) must begin with these passages.

In tractate *Brachot* a discussion takes place regarding the impermissibility of reciting the Sh'ma in certain situations, specifically, in the presence of someone who is nude.¹ The concern lies in discerning which situations will distract someone such that he will not be able to recite the Sh'ma with due concentration. For instance, one Sage feels that a man's own wife will not be a distraction, even if their bodies are touching, because her body is like his own.

Then, there is a break in the discussion. What follows is a grouping of four separate statements about aspects of a woman that are *ervah*, or, sexually stimulating. The others mentioned are all parts of her body such as her thigh or hair, but the *amora* (scholar whose comments on the Mishnah helped to create the Gemara) Shmuel, in the third of the four statements, says “A woman's voice is sexually stimulating, as it says ‘For your voice is sweet...’”² It is ambiguous whether these four statements are in fact meant to be applied

to the Sh'ma or whether these are ad hoc comments. This will become the fodder for intense debate later on. For example, one opinion is offered in the halakhic work *Ohr Zarua* that “[Shmuel's statement] is not brought to refer to *Kriat Sh'ma*. For a woman herself recites the Sh'ma!³” In other words, if a woman's voice is inherently like her exposed thigh, whose exposure prevents the recitation of the Sh'ma, then by definition, no woman ever could recite it.

An opposite viewpoint is that brought by the Meiri.⁴ Commenting on the same passage, he says, “...and a woman's singing voice is sexually stimulating with regard to recitation of the Sh'ma.” While he does not directly counter the logical problem raised in the *Ohr Zarua*, he has, however, limited the prohibition to a singing voice, saying that a man hearing his wife's speaking voice may recite the Sh'ma. When the Meiri goes on to say that a woman's mere speaking voice can be stimulating and thus forbidden, he cites another Talmudic passage, the only other one to explicitly mention Shmuel's statement.⁵

In this passage, an odd confrontation is described between Rav Yehudah and Rav Nahman. Rav Nahman has forced Rav Yehudah to appear before him in court on trumped up charges and, Rav Yehudah is obviously miffed, ready to spar by citing prohibitions in which Rabbi Nahman has become lax. When Rav Nahman asks him to bring greetings to Rav Nahman's own wife in another city, Rav Yehudah retorts, “Shmuel says, ‘A woman's voice is sexually stimulating.’”

The Meiri cites this passage to argue that a man is forbidden to listen to even the speaking voice of a woman not his wife.⁶ Yet, we do have another *risbon* (early commentator) who explains the two Talmudic passages we have seen thus far in an interesting way. The Rashba cites the Ra'avad, who says the prohibition in *Brachot* is limited only to a man not being able to recite the

Sh'ma while listening to his wife's singing.⁷ He says that hearing her speaking voice, as well as seeing parts of her body that are normally shown, are not impediments. The Ra'avad then links together Brachot and Kiddushin by saying that in the latter is a prohibition for a man on hearing the speaking voice of another woman, but only in exchanging warm greetings, lest this bring them close in a way that would lead to sexual immorality.

To this point, none of the Rishonim quoted here have made mention of the third Talmudic passage which raises a possible prohibition of a woman's voice. This account in tractate Sotah lists possible prohibitions on music and gaiety, instituted since the destruction of the temple.⁸ “Rav Yosef said, ‘When men sing and women join in, it is licentiousness; when women sing and men join in, it is like fire in flax.’” Clearly, the context here is neither tefilla nor ordinary conversation, but an activity at the other end of a spectrum of holiness — a drunken gathering. Here too, it appears that a man listening and responding to female singers is more problematic than if the roles were reversed. If those activities are viewed as along a spectrum of holiness, then the drunken gathering being outlawed in this Gemara is certainly at the opposite end. It is also true that men listening to and responding to female singers is seen as more problematic than the opposite.

This passage, despite its more explicit reference to singing, does not enter the halakhic discussion of kol isha until a teshuva written centuries later, during the time of the acharonim (later commentators). Rabbi Moses Sofer writes⁹, in the context of a choir in the synagogue, that “mixed singing,” is a form of sexual immorality, and quotes Rashi that hearing a woman's singing voice will arouse a man's evil inclination, something especially abhorrent in a synagogue.¹⁰

Thus far, we have examined halakhic decisors analyzing the Gemara directly. What about the major legal codes?

One early code is that of Rabbi Isaac Alfasi, the Rif. Strikingly, he makes no reference whatsoever to Shmuel's statement in Brachot, nor

to Rav Yehuda's statement in Kiddushin. We assume this to mean he does not consider the "ad hoc" statements to be legally binding.

Maimonides, generally follows the Rif and accordingly notes no prohibition on hearing a woman's voice singing or speaking, during recitation of the Sh'ma. But he does find another context for such a prohibition — situations that must be avoided lest one come to engage in improper sexual relations.¹¹ He writes, "even to listen to the voice of a forbidden woman or to look at her hair is forbidden." Interestingly, the Rambam here uses the word *ervah* as a noun, meaning "a forbidden woman", rather than an adjective, "sexually stimulating." He makes this clear by excluding unmarried women, who are not forbidden, and by stating that a man's own wife who is in niddah, though now forbidden, soon will not be, and thus is not covered by the prohibition. It is clear that, far from saying that a woman's voice is sexually enticing in any context, the Rambam is instead concerned about avoidance of improper relations, and listening lustfully to a married woman's voice is one of a few avenues towards an illicit relationship.

Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher, in his monumental work, the *Tur*, follows Maimonides on both counts: affirming the prohibition of a woman's voice as a preventive measure against illicit relations and omitting any reference to *kol isha* in reference to reciting *Kriat Sh'ma*.

Rav Yosef Karo, in his Beit Yosef commentary to the *Tur*, brings a fascinating hiddush (new idea) to the discussion.¹² He first quotes a long passage from the Rosh in which the Rosh, similarly to the *Tur* who does not include *kol isha* in his section of impediments to the Sh'ma, says that the tenet *kol b'isha ervah* does not apply to the Sh'ma. But within that citation is another from the Mordechai, in which that authority first insists that *kol isha* is banned from *Kriat Sh'ma* and any context in which devarim she b'kedushah are being recited. But then he brings Rabbenu Yonah on the Mordechai to say, "...even at a time when she is singing, if he can inline his heart [concentrate] to his prayer such that

he will not even hear her, ... it is permitted." In this statement, the responsibility for proper attention during prayer is put back where it belongs; on the one praying.

The Hazon Ish, writing much later, mentions the same leniency in his laws of *Kriat Sh'ma*.¹³ He both bemoans it as a necessary concession to the times, and extends the same permission to giving a public Torah lecture when there will be women present with uncovered hair.

In the *Shulchan Aruch*, Rabbi Karo echoes the findings of the *Tur*.¹⁴ In the general context of *arayot*, or illicit relations, he repeats the prohibition on hearing the voice of a forbidden woman or seeing her hair. For *Kriat Sh'ma*, he puts in a cautionary note not seen in the *Tur*, and writes, "it is good to be careful and avoid hearing a woman's singing voice while reciting the Sh'ma."¹⁵ Even this muted warning is limited by Rav Moshe Isserles. The Rama adds here that while the above is true even for a man's wife, in general "a voice to which he is accustomed is not sexually stimulating."

We must mention one major responsum by Rav Yaakov Yehiel Weinberg, writing as the *Sridei Esh*.¹⁶ He is discussing a youth group that often had boys and girls together singing Shabbat zemirot at their gatherings. At one point in his lengthy essay, he first points out that, far from the wine parties banned in the passage in Kiddushin, "those who sing holy songs do this for the sake of heaven, in order to awaken religious feelings among the girls...". He then invokes the principle of *et la'asot l'Hashem, hafru Toratecha*, it is a time to act for G-d, uproot your Torah. He quotes the *Tosafot* saying "better to uproot one letter from the Torah, that the Torah not be forgotten from Israel." He cautions that only the Sages can determine when this is appropriate, but states that the situation at hand is one such time. He writes, "In this matter, in which there is no real prohibition, but only a custom of the pious and instance of especial modesty, it is permitted to look for supporters...". In his following paragraph, he adds one last plank in the platform, saying that these girls "have a certain level of self respect, and would regard it as a dis-

grace and an exile from the community, were they forbidden to participate in singing Shabbat songs."

In conclusion, we see that the prohibition of *kol isha* has a long and complex history. The constant arguments over its appropriate context and even the very nature of the prohibition would suggest that the process of reinterpretation is not over. In the context of religious observance, such as during recitation of the Sh'ma, davening in shul or religiously inspirational settings, there are moderate positions that permit women's voices to be heard. These positions clearly grow out of a consideration for women's feelings and they are brought down without any stigma of sexual distraction or hint of the danger of enticement. Moreover, there is a whole range of contemporary situations that fall neither in the category of spiritual concentration nor drunken feasting that are not explicitly discussed in the sources, and therefore need not necessarily be bridged to *kol isha* in a way that is restrictive. Certainly in our day, when women's voices are welcomed in all of their many manifestations and when women's sensibilities and self-regard are taken with seriousness, a dialogue on this subject should be opened that includes the voices of all. ■

Mia Diamond Padwa holds an A.B. from Harvard University and an M.A. from the Jewish Theological Seminary. She is a 1999 graduate of the Drisba Scholars Circle and will be teaching a course there based on this article. She spends the rest of her time caring for her two young children.

¹ Brachot 24a

² Shir haShirim 2:14

³ Laws of the Purity of Recitation of Sh'ma and Prayer, section 133.

⁴ Beit ha Behirah on Brachot 24a

⁵ Kiddushin 70a

⁶ Beit ha Behirah, ibid.

⁷ Hiddushei Rashba to Brachot 25 (sic)

⁸ Sotah 48a

⁹ Responsa of the Hatam Sofer, no. 190.

¹⁰ Sotah 48a, "like fire in flax."

¹¹ Laws of Prohibited Relations, Chapter 21:2.

¹² Orach Chaim, 75:1, "ctav ha Rosh."

¹³ Laws of Recitation of Sh'ma, no. 16.

¹⁴ Even ha Ezer 21:1.

¹⁵ Orach Chaim 76: 1.

¹⁶ Responsa of the Sridei Esh, no. 8.

Women in Leadership Positions

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women on the board. In 1999, Schultz noted, it is not as hard for women to find opportunities to be involved on a leadership level if they want to be. "I think that it is easier for a man president to interact with the rabbi or the male school principal, but there isn't any stigma about women in these positions anymore." After Schultz's oldest child was born, she stopped working, which afforded her more time to dedicate to the community. "It's still harder for women to say 'I have a meeting at 6:00 and expect the family to accommodate her,'" Schultz said. "Women, more than men, still have to ask their families for permission to attend night meetings." Time is still tight, and her husband has been very supportive and flexible with his schedule to enable her to be active in the leadership of the *shul*.

As head of the only Orthodox elementary school in Cherry Hill, NJ, Alice Green knows that she is in a unusual position. Not many Orthodox day schools have female principals. More often women run the English department or the girls' school while overall leadership of the school is reserved for a male rabbi. "*Bais Yaakov* was the beginning of the vision that women need to be educated, and much of my experience is an outgrowth of that," Green commented. "Women have always had tremendous roles in Jewish education and we should embrace that tradition. Women have always been educators in the home, and now we are moving into more formal roles." Green urges that more women become involved "even on the PTA. Get an education to strengthen your involvement. Learn as much as you can and the rest will follow," she assures.

Tova Avihai-Kremer is the chairperson of Kehilat Yedidiah in Jerusalem. When Yedidiah was founded 20 years ago, one of its main goals was to create an environment where women could better express themselves. The commitment to this purpose yielded a

women's Torah service, women making announcements and speeches in *shul*, and a *mebitza* that runs down the center of the sanctuary. "Yedidiah is very involved in *gmilut basadim* (charitable deeds) both internally and externally. We are focusing on improving the quality of our *tefilla*. We have a unique group of people who are very dedicated to finding new ways of spiritual self-expression," Avihai-Kremer said. Her community has been very supportive of her leadership, and her family is dedicated to the *kehillah*. "It is a huge commitment and emotional responsibility," Avihai-Kremer noted. "There is also psychological weight to being involved in a communal undertaking. Men need to relax their image of what a woman's traditional place is within the community and view women as their equals. Women need to dare—to see the doors that are open to them and to live up to the challenges that these new doors present. By accepting the position of chairperson, I felt I was sending a message: *Women Can!* We are in the middle of a process: It is a revolution and I am grateful to be a part of it."

Emily Zitter of Beit Shemesh, Israel consulted with her *rav* before standing in for the *rosh vaad* (chairperson of the board) position in her new *kehillah*. The rabbi's *p'sak* (decision) was that it would be okay for her to be president if she didn't make any announcements in *shul*. "Many Orthodox institutions are run by and for women. They may have a rabbi as *halakhic* descisor, but the institutions are freely run by women." Zitter recalled an old poster from her college days that read: "Sometimes the right man for the job is a woman."

Rachel Landsberg, a Drisha scholar who is the past co-president of Kehilat Orach Eliezer in Manhattan, found her role to be a welcome challenge. Her co-president was a man who was "very good about making sure we were equal. But, he could be involved in ritual matters in a way that I could not be. I was visible in front of the *shul* in terms

of announcements and speaking, but during services the boundaries were less clear and less equal. Traditionally and historically men have assumed the leadership roles". She went on to say, "Things are changing. Today's women are more learned and more scholarly. But we must feel that our presence in *shul* matters. We need to make our voices heard and value the voices we have to contribute. We have to be willing to take risks in order to become visible." Current KOE president Pam Scheininger agrees. "Women have to cross many barriers to be involved in any type of Orthodox Judaism, but at KOE we try to remove the social barriers and challenge them."

In his book *Jewish Women In Time and Torah*, Eliezer Berkovits writes: "Public officials function on the basis of their acceptance by the people....Such acceptance has validity with the support of the *halakhic* system of Judaism. There is surprising precedent for a woman being active in public affairs. The prophet Elisha wished to express his gratitude to the Shunnamite for the generous hospitality she had extended to him. In her presence, he had his young servant say to her: 'Behold, you have so anxiously taken care of us. What can we do for you? Is there anything you would have us talk to the king about, or the head of the army?' Her answer was: 'I dwell in the midst of my people,' which *the Targum Yonatan* renders: 'I am engaged in the affairs of my people [i.e., and carry the burden of the community]'. This indeed should be the essence of women's status today in Judaism: I live in the midst of my people and take my share in caring for the communal needs in accordance with my ability." ■

Abbie Gottesman has studied at Pardes and at Nish'mat in Israel, and is currently a member of the Board of Pardes and of JOFA.

Esther D. Kustanowitz is the editor of the JOFA Journal and a published book author.

PINAT SEFARIM: THE JOFA BOOK CORNER

RECENT TITLES OF INTEREST:

Life on the Fringes: A Feminist Journey Towards Traditional Rabbinic Ordination by Haviva Ner-David (JFL Media, January 2000). In this new book, Haviva Ner-David traces her personal journey towards reconciling her feminism and her passion for Orthodox observance. Included are chapters on halakha, tahara and tum'ah, and mikva, among others.

Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice by Judith Hauptman (Westview Press, January 1999). A scholar of Talmud, Judith Hauptman demonstrates through the study of selected Talmudic texts,

the role of the rabbis in elevating women's status in society.

TITLES YOU MAY HAVE MISSED:

Guardian of Eden: In Search of the Jewish Woman and Letters to a Jewish Feminist by Yisroel Miller (Feldheim Publishers, 1998). Describes the role of Orthodox women in contemporary Jewish society. Written with humor and compassion, it covers women's role in the synagogue and the search for spiritual fulfillment.

Distant Sisters: The Women I Left Behind by Yehudit Rotem (Jewish Publication Society, March 1997). After her divorce, Rotem took her

six daughters and left the *baredi* (ultra-orthodox) community in which she had lived for most of her life. This book offers an inside look at the perspectives of haredi women.

Five Books of Miriam: A Woman's Commentary on the Torah by Ellen Frankel (Grosset-Putnam, 1996). Each section of the Five Books of Miriam begins with a summary of the weekly Torah reading and then offers responses from the perspectives of biblical and talmudic era women. During the course of the book, the reader hears the observations of figures such as Lilith, Rachel, Esther and Beruriah, each in her own distinctive voice. ■

Modesty

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aries. Not least, the sexual freedoms embraced by women three decades ago have largely proven to enhance the sexual exploitation of women, rather than their pleasure.

Responding to the pathology of this world without *tzniut*, journalist Wendy Shalit recently published a book, *A Return to Modesty*; she urges a movement against the grain of American society, reestablishing a respect for modest clothing, premarital abstinence, and marital monogamy. In Orthodox rhetoric today we certainly see a new emphasis on modesty.

But modesty for whom, and why? The new modest-makers do not address the broader societal issues of widespread materialism, arrogance, and immorality. Instead, they focus narrowly on micro-managing women's wardrobes and silencing women's voices.

And yet, powerful biblical passages instruct men on the critical importance of male modesty. The prophet Micah declares men should "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God." (*Michab*, 6:8) The concept of *hatzneah lechet* is not focused primarily on women.

Some segments of the Orthodox community take a short cut in re-sealing the boundaries that separate Orthodox from non-Orthodox (and non-Jewish) life. Women are asked to become more and more punctilious in laws of *kol isba* and *tzniut* and to avoid leadership roles, because the rigorous enforcement of these laws gives the entire society the illusion that they have successfully resisted the incursions of modernity. Constricting women's lives becomes a symbolic exorcism of modernity.

Insistence on limiting women's lives has probably been influenced by several interrelated factors:

(1) The feminist movement has created an emphasis on women unprecedented in religious thought. Women are subjected to greater attention and scrutiny than ever before.

(2) The grassroots prevalence of feminist agendas in American Jewish life has created its own backlash. Within the Orthodox world, "feminist" has become a code word for "modern," and an emphasis on women has often taken the form of reinforcing traditional women's behaviors.

The reactionary segments of the Orthodox community are fond of accusing those to their left of entering onto a slippery slope, which will

undermine "Torah true" Judaism. However, just the opposite is true. The right wing has climbed onto a slippery slope in which restrictions upon the lives of women become more and more extreme.

The current extreme emphasis on female modesty is a distortion of traditional Jewish values. Moreover it is part of an unwholesome tendency which also includes rigid separation of men and women, silencing women, and disenfranchising women even in areas in which clear *halakbic* precedents exist for expanding women's roles: a constellation of demands profoundly inappropriate for the world in which the vast majority of Orthodox Jews live. The right wing is sliding down a slippery slope toward the unconscionable psychic crippling of their—and our (!)—own daughters.

Let us reclaim the true prophetic meaning of *hatzneah lechet*, as men and women who treat each other with justice and mercy, and require more modesty of ourselves than of others. ■

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