

JOFA Journal

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From the Other Side of the *Mechitzah*

JOFA views Orthodox feminism as enhancing the religious life of the entire community, male and female. JOFA also recognizes, as the title of our 2004 conference clearly stated, that the only way for Orthodox feminist goals to be achieved is in partnership with the men

in our communities. The theme of this issue is “From the Other Side of the *Mechitzah*”, and all of its contributors are male. They include rabbis, scholars and laypeople who are all advocates of increasing the participation of Orthodox women in study, prayer and in public religious life. We have deliberately included the views of some who have reservations or criticisms regarding certain directions the Orthodox

feminist movement has taken. We expect this issue to stimulate much thought regarding the goals and strategies of Orthodox feminism, and we invite reader responses, which we hope to publish as a supplement to the next JOFA Journal.

With this issue, we wish to extend a “*Yasher koach*” to all Orthodox feminists on the other side of the *mechitzah*.

The Editors

Please direct all responses to JOFA, 15 East 26th Street, Suite 915, New York, NY 10010 or via email at JOFA@JOFA.org. Submissions will be included in the supplement at the discretion of the editors.

From the President's Husband

By Melvin D. Newman

I am periodically asked how it feels to be married to the president of JOFA. Do I feel excluded or marginalized? Do I feel threatened? Do my wife's activities take away from the quality of the religious life of our family? The answer to these questions is no, no and no. About twenty years ago, Carol asked me if I understood women's desire to participate more fully in public Judaism. I told her that intellectually I understood, but emotionally I did not feel their hunger. Carol's involvement in religious Jewish feminism has allowed me to “get it.” I now feel their hunger. Indeed, living with a partner who is so involved in this issue has led me to conclude that accommodating the desire of women to be more active participants in all areas of Jewish life is one of the greatest challenges facing modern Orthodoxy today. In that JOFA addresses these very issues, I believe it should be embraced and supported, not feared.

The day school movement is now educating its third and fourth generations of students. Moreover, the number of students attending day schools has grown dramatically. Many young women who have performed as the equals of boys from kindergarten through high school, and who have been entering elite professional schools in numbers equal to or greater than their male counterparts, are seeking similar access in the Jewish sphere. This desire for access represents a profound threat to the *status quo* and, as



such, has naturally generated heated emotional reactions from those on both sides of the issue. But, from the perspective of one in the front row of the men's side of the *mechitzah*, I sense an evolution in the camp of change, from initial anger and impatience, to hope and a determination to stay the course. What may have started as a revolution has turned into an evolution, with an acknowledgement that change comes slowly.

For young women graduating from a day school today, there are options for advanced Jewish study that were unavailable even twenty-five years ago. Institutions such as Drisha, MaTaN, Nishmat and Midreshet Lindenbaum now offer women the ability to study Jewish texts at the highest level. Because of our long-standing association with Drisha,

Carol and I have had the privilege and pleasure of meeting many of these young women on a regular basis. They are an impressive group—enthusiastic, energetic, sincere and smart. Their ability to enhance and enrich the Jewish world is limitless. Unfortunately, their opportunity to do so is not. It is our community's collective responsibility to create more institutions to meet the demand of women thirsting for deep Jewish knowledge, but that is not enough. We must also provide employment opportunities so that these learned and capable women can use their talents for the benefit of us all. The failure of the community to take on this responsibility may lead these women to choose other careers and discourage future scholars and leaders from even embarking on this path. We must not allow this to happen.

On Sensitivity and Compassion in *Pesak Halakha*

By Daniel Sperber

In my talk at JOFA's Fifth Annual International Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy this year, I argued that there are certain basic underlying values that permeate *halakha*. Some may wish to regard them as meta-*halakhic* principles,

but I believe them to be basic guidelines within normative *halakha*. One such guiding principle is that the Torah is a *Torat Hayyim*, a living Torah, meaning a livable system, as it says in Leviticus 18:5, “וַיְחִי בָרָם” (“...and he shall live by them”);

moreover, the Torah's “ways are the ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace” (Proverbs 3:17). This principle, intrinsic in rabbinic thinking, has determined the *halakha* in a great variety of legal contexts.

Thus, for example, the Sages, in clarifying what plants were to be used with the *lulav* (Lev. 23:40), rejected certain suggested identifications of plants that were prick-

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On Sensitivity

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ly and spiky and would scratch the hands of whoever handled them, considering it not feasible that the Torah would demand the use of such plants since “her ways are the ways of pleasantness” (*Sukkah* 32b). Numerous examples of the use of this verse as a guiding principle are to be found in a variety of *halakhic* contexts throughout rabbinic literature. Indeed, in *Gittin* 59b, Abbaye expounds to Rav Yosef:

All the Torah is also *mi-pnei darkei shalom*, intended to engender peaceful relations, as it is written, “her ways are the ways of pleasantness, and her paths are the paths of peace.”

Perhaps this is one of the underlying, although unstated, reasons for the remarkably sensitive attitude of the Sages to the *agunah* issue. As the Rambam wrote in his *Mishneh Torah Hilkhot Gerushin* (13.29): “For the Sages directed us in this matter to be lenient and not to be stringent in order to free the *agunah*.” He continues:

Let it not be difficult in your eyes that the Sages freed such serious “*ervah*” (state of forbidden union) through the testimony of a woman or a slave or a bondwoman, or a gentile or on the basis of casual narrative (*mesiah le-fi-tumo*), or by hearsay, or based on a written document (*u-mi-pi ha-kejav*) [all normally inadmissible as evidence D.S.] ...[and this is]... in order that the daughters of Israel should not remain enchained (*agumot*).

The Sages showed similar compassion towards the “*mamzer*,” the illegitimate child, who through no fault of his own, is stigmatized by the *halakha*. They sought all manner of ways to alleviate his situa-

tion and remedy his status to permit him free union with whomsoever he wishes. Thus, according to *Yevamot* 80a, if a husband goes away leaving his wife alone for twelve months, and she gives birth at the end of this period, we assume that her pregnancy lasted twelve months rather than suspecting her of infidelity. And if this occurred even after twelve months, according to the author of *Halakhot Gedolot*, we posit that the husband returned secretly in the interim period and brought about his wife’s pregnancy, unless he makes a declaration to the contrary. So too, if a woman declares that her offspring is not of her husband, we do not accept her words, to rule the child as illegitimate (*Yevamot* 47b, *Bava Batra* 127a). And there is no such thing as an uncertain *mamzer* (*safek mamzer*). If there is an uncertainty as to his illegitimacy, he is not a *mamzer* (*Kiddushin* 76a).

Compassion and sensitivity are, then, the hallmarks of classical normative *halakha*, and that is why they were the catalysts for creative and innovative problem solving. In the words of the Rambam:

Thus you have learned that the laws of the Torah are not [intended to be] vindictive in [this] world, but [to display] mercy and charity and peace in [this] world (*Hilkhos Shabbat* 2:3).

Indeed this sensitivity expresses itself clearly in the *halakhic* use of the principle of “*kevod ha-beriyot*,” human dignity, that plays an important role in so many legal contexts. Again, in the words of the Rambam:

All these matters [are judged] according to how the judge views what is suitable for them and what the law requires. And overall, his deeds should be directed towards heaven, and let not human dignity be treated lightly in his eyes (*Hilkhos Sanhedrin* 24:10).

In my many years as an active congregational rabbi, this has become an ever more dominant element in my own *halakhic* thinking. I was deeply distressed when many years ago a friend told me the following tale. It was late afternoon on one of the minor fast-days. His wife, then in her sixth month of pregnancy, was feeling extremely weak and nauseous. He went to a prominent rabbi who lived close by and asked whether she was permitted to eat something or at least to drink some water. The rabbi noted that

since the fast would be over in a couple of hours, she could wait till it ended. Shortly afterwards, she fainted and fell down. Fortunately she suffered no injury, and no damage was done. I was greatly angered at the rabbi whom I had no doubt had ruled incorrectly and not in accordance with the established *halakha*. Perhaps the husband had not explained himself sufficiently when he asked the question, but it is the duty of a rabbi to “interrogate” the questioner in order to get a full picture of the situation. The absence of any searching inquiry into the details of the case, the offhand reply, and most seriously, the lack of sensitivity to a pregnant woman’s plight, were, in my view, serious flaws in his *halakhic* praxis. Both the questioner and his wife were deeply religious people, as the rabbi well knew, and the question would not have been put to him had she not felt very unwell.

In later years I had many occasions to appear in rabbinical courts seeking to help litigants, bear witness, and smooth the way before the judges in complicated cases. Invariably, as we waited in the waiting-room to be called before the court, the usher would come in and



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Synagogue Mechitzah, Nov, Israel.
Courtesy of Rivkah Lubitch Collection
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Photo by Hadassa Friedman.

shout out, “so and so for divorce proceedings,” “so and so for conversion” etc. This was not only the height of impropriety, but also, on occasions, deeply humiliating to the relevant parties. After a few such events, I wrote a letter to the then Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, the late Rabbi Kolitz, a saintly man of deep Torah erudition and equally deep humanity, describing the situation, and demanding a change. Indeed, within a short while, new directives were given to the ushers, and such procedures were not repeated. But what still disturbed me greatly was the fact that an outsider—myself—had to be instrumental in bringing about this change. Why had not the rabbis and judges done this long before my intervention? Had *halakhic* thinking been accompanied by sensitivity to people’s feelings, such events would never have taken place.

More recently, I was approached by a young man for a loan from our synagogue *gemach* (free-loan society). “What happened? Why do you need a loan?” I asked him. “Well, I’m a *ba’al-teshuvah* and recently moved into a new apartment. The previous occupants had been non-religious and probably placed both meat and milk on the marble kitchen counter. So I went to a rabbi to ask him how to make the kitchen kosher, and he told me I had to replace the counter completely. So I got a worker to do so, and when he ripped out the counter, many of the wall tiles behind it came off and cracked, and some of the pipes were broken. In the end I had to renovate much of the kitchen and found myself in considerable debt to the contractor, and I now need a loan to pay him off.” I thought to myself: Why did he not come to me? For there are three *halakhic* opinions as to the status of marble (or stoneware), and the one most commonly held is that stoneware does not absorb; consequently it did not become non-kosher though it had come into contact with both meat and milk. I personally would have taken the middle view, and, partly for educational reasons, and partly for psychological ones, advised him to “kasher” the counter by pouring boiling water over it, after cleaning it well with cleaning powder and not using it for twenty-four hours. This would satisfy his spiritual needs, without causing him unnecessary expenses, and be well in accordance with mainstream *halakhic* ruling.

Today the most stringent approach is, as it were, the easiest way out. It requires little thought and “you can’t go wrong,” or that is what some rabbis seem to think. In fact, they are quite mistaken. Causing financial loss unnecessarily, causing physical distress in cases not



Lincoln Square Main Synagogue, New York. Photo by Joshua Newman.

mandated by the *halakha*, and, albeit unwittingly, humiliating people, are all serious infractions of biblical law—*issurei de-oraita*.

These, and all too many additional examples that I could cite, have heightened my awareness of the urgent necessity for a much greater degree of sensitivity on the part of rabbis in all manner of interpersonal questions. Whether it be in cases of conversion, *mamzerut*, divorce, *agunot* or the other various areas of feminist concern, in all such cases, sensitivity and compassion must be the guideline directing the rabbi’s thought, urging him to find a humanitarian solution to the problem within the parameters of normative *halakha*. Thus when I was approached by a woman who had just lost her mother and wished to recite *kaddish* in synagogue, explaining that she was the only child of a sole Holocaust survivor, I readily acceded to her request relying, *inter alia*, on a ruling of the late R. Aaron Soloveitchik (*Od Yisrael Yosef Beni Hai*, Yeshivat Brisk 1993 p.101, sect. 32). Recently I was cautiously asked by an

Orthodox family whether they could have a *bat mitzvah* celebration in their own house, with a service in which the *bat mitzvah* would read her portion from a Torah scroll within the framework of a family *minyán*. My reply was that there existed a *halakhic* precedent for such practice in *Sefer ha-Battim* of the great 13th century Spanish scholar R. David b. Samuel Kochavi (sect.6). The family was delighted that they could satisfy their desires, while keeping well within the parameters of classical *halakha*.

I believe that by making sensitivity and compassion the guidelines and by ruling in this manner, a *posek* (*halakhic* decisor) is following the mainstream of *halakhic* tradition, demonstrating the beauty of our religion and legal system, and sanctifying the name of God (*mekadesh shem shomayim*).

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Feminist Innovations in Orthodoxy Today: Is Everything in *Halakha*—*Halakhic*?

By Aryeh A. Frimer

What I have to say may well surprise many who know me as a *halakhic* feminist. Over the past 33 years, I have been involved in numerous ways—both in theory and practice, in lecture and in print—with various aspects of the “Women and *Halakha*” issue. Many of the innovations that are taken for granted today, including women’s prayer groups, *megillah* readings, *hakafot*, recitation

of *birkhat ha-gomel* and Mourner’s *Kaddish*, waiting for ten men and ten women before reciting *barekhu*, women on *shul* boards, and *gemara shiurim* for women, were already put in place at Harvard-Radcliffe Hillel in the early Seventies during my tenure as Orthodox rabbinic advisor. And many of these same innovations have been implemented at the Tiphereth Moshe

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Synagogue in Rehovot, where I have been active since 1974.

When I first embarked on this venture, into what was then—to a large degree—uncharted waters, I did so with a sense of confidence and commitment. I was confident in the inherent viability of the *halakhic* process and committed to the religious value of the greater involvement for women in Jewish ritual life. And I remain committed to these values to this day. But to be honest, after more than three decades as a *halakhic* feminist, I am now deeply perturbed. People who have read my articles know that they are firmly rooted in the writings and analysis of a large cadre of rabbinic authorities and scholars. The area of “Women and *Halakha*,” like any Torah endeavor, has to be treated seriously (*be-koved rosh*) and carefully analyzed with the rigor of classic *halakhic* methodology. Unfortunately, I sense today that my concern for the integrity of *halakha* is not necessarily shared by many in the Orthodox feminist movement.

The title of this paper is “Feminist Innovations in Orthodoxy Today: Is Everything in *Halakha*—*Halakhic*?” With your permission, I would like to sharpen the question: “What criteria should be used by centrist Orthodoxy for judging and perhaps setting limits on innovative behavior?” I believe that there are three decisive factors by which innovations need to be judged, and these are: *halakhic* validity, motivation and public policy considerations. While each deserves lengthy development, the shortness of this essay allows me to only focus on the first.

My position may be summarized as follows: The modern Orthodox community should not support innovations which are of seriously questionable *halakhic* validity; without *halakha* as our anchor, we will lose our direction and *raison d’être*. Positions do not *ipso facto* become *halakhically* sound—simply because they are couched in *halakhic* terminology or posited by a person entitled “Rabbi.” Let me now expand upon these ideas.

Given that we are talking about a Torah-committed Jewry, we are dealing with a community whose actions should be bound and, therefore, judged by *halakha*. But as Hamlet says, “Ay, there’s the rub!” For it is critical that we understand what this central term “*halakha*” has traditionally meant, and how this understanding has recently come under attack.

In the absence of prophecy, we have no direct way of knowing what God’s will is. Classical Orthodoxy maintains, however, that the Divine Law-Giver gave us the tools to indirectly discover His will via the *halakhic* process. The latter is a person’s attempt at discovering the Divine will—the *retzon haBoreh*. The greater the scholar, the more adept at utilizing the process, the closer he or she will come to accurately revealing what God wants of us in a particular situation. Such outstanding scholars are called *poskim* (*halakhic* decisors). If one is not a *posek* and is incapable of utilizing the system, then one needs to turn to someone who is for such guidance. Not every rabbi is a *posek*: as in any field of scholarship, only those learned in the field are qualified to recognize the true expert and genius.

“Without *halakha*
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The *halakhic* system and process yields the *pesak halakha* (*halakhic* decision) which is considered by tradition to be the closest human beings can come to approximating the Divine will. The utilization of the rules of *pesak*, as well as their application to a particular case, is based upon intellectual analysis. In addition, relevant precedent needs to be scrutinized. Admittedly, since we are dealing with human beings, what one considers to be “the proper” understanding of the rules and precedent is often a matter of discretion and subjective preference. One cannot always prove that one’s analysis or interpretation is the absolutely correct *peshat* (meaning of the text). Nonetheless, the analysis and understanding is always subject to peer review by other *talmidei hakhamim* and can be either confirmed or rejected—as with any academic discipline. In this context, the consensus view of the *poskim* (*rov poskim*) is often invoked as an indication that a certain approach or result is the more compelling view—even though majority is



Synagogue Mechitzah, Kibbutz Merav, Israel.
Courtesy of Rivkah Lubitch
Collection of Mechitzah Photographs.
Photo by Yael Goldblatt.

not always an absolute arbiter or guarantor for absolute truth.

But the most important element of *pesak* is intellectual honesty. As noted above, this process focuses on the rules and analysis. The *pesak* is the result of this analysis—wherever the chips may fall. As Hayyim Soloveitchik (*AJS Review*, 12:2, 1987) has written: “If law is conceived of, as religious law must be, as a revelation of the divine will, then any attempt to align that will with human wants, any attempt to have reality control rather than to be itself controlled by the divine norm, is an act of blasphemy and is inconceivable to a God-fearing man.” Within such a framework there should be few, if any, conscious and deliberately predetermined goals. The goals should not precede the *pesak*, but rather should become evident after the fact. Similarly, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik repeatedly noted that Jewish philosophy derives its legitimacy and validity from *halakha*, and not vice versa.

All agree that there is nothing improper about difficult life experiences motivating one to ask tough questions. The objection is to having these factors predetermine the answer! Indeed, Rav Lichtenstein (*Tradition*, 36:1, 2002) cites Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zt”l* as maintaining that: “commiseration is acknowledged as a legitimate factor stimulating the *posek*’s quest for a solution, but it is barred as a component of the *halakhic* process proper, once that has been set in motion.” In addition, a *talmid hakham* needs to examine himself and his situation candidly, to ascertain that whatever cultural forces [he] perhaps absorbs, are filtered through the prism of his Torah personality—and do not simply seep through the pores of his semi-conscious being.

(For reasons beyond the scope of this piece, the only clear exceptions to these

guidelines are situations of *iggun* and *mamzerut*. Here the *halakha* instructs the *posek* to be lenient, if at all possible. But these are the exceptions that merely prove the rule).

Recently, however, a new non-traditional approach has begun to emerge. This approach maintains that the *halakhic* rules are merely a means to an end. The ends are overarching religious goals that are independent of—and complementary to—the rules. One must first and foremost determine what these religious goals are—e.g., spirituality, closeness to God, kindness, family harmony, dignity, *kevod ha-beriyot*, etc. These goals are determined not by means of the *halakhic* process, but independently of it—utilizing the entire corpus of Jewish law and lore—as well as one's cultural and communal values and creed (e.g., equality and autonomy). If the result of the *halakhic* process squares with one's religious goals—fine. What however if it does not?

I see at least two approaches taking hold. The more radical view is prepared to reinterpret sources and “bend” the rules to yield a result that conforms to the desired goals. Now, there has always been room for *hiddush* (innovation) in *halakha*; but, as Hayyim Soloveitchik notes, it was subject to the *posek's* honest belief and intellectual integrity that he had discovered a new correct understanding of the source. With the new contemporary approach I am describing here, striving to be loyal to the sources is not an imperative. As long as one can find some interpretation which neutralizes the problematic source or rule—*dayeinu*. In the hierarchy of determinative factors of *pesak*, argues this radical view, the religious goal often supercedes rules, text or precedent.

There is a more conservative variant of this approach that will look for a respected opinion in tradition which squares with the predetermined goal. And it will latch on to this position,

even if it is a minority view or one that has been rejected in the past. The fact is that the *Hazon Ish*, and many of the Lithuanian school, would adopt a minority view *halakha le-ma'aseh* (in a particular practical case)—but only, if they were convinced—based upon expertise in learning and a breadth of knowledge—that it was intellectually the correct one—*emet le-amitah*. The approach I am describing, however, adopts the minority view not because of its intellectual correctness, but rather because “it gets you where you want to go.”

There are many religious feminist writers who clearly share my concern regarding *halakhic* validity. Their writings are well documented, and their analysis sound and rooted. Their outstanding scholarship has uncovered hitherto unknown sources in the *halakhic* literature which they have applied sensitively and creatively.

Unfortunately, examples of both the radical and more conservative variants of the non-traditional approach abound, as well. (Cases in point are the repeated attempts to include women in the *minyan* and serving as prayer leaders for *devarim she-bi-kedusha*, from which they are exempt.) Both variants claim to be *halakhic*—because they have utilized some source or another in *halakha* to buttress their position. However, as noted above, this is clearly at odds with traditional and classical methodology. For the classicists, this new approach draws the bulls-eye after shooting the arrows!

Modern Orthodoxy should welcome diversity and flexibility—but any innovations must be *halakhically* well-founded and solidly-based. For as Prof. Yeshayahu Leibowitz would challenge, we must always ask ourselves whether we are in reality serving the Divine will or our own.

Rabbi Aryeh Frimer is Ethel and David Resnick Professor of Active Oxygen Chemistry at Bar-Ilan University. The author would like to acknowledge the important contributions made to his thinking on this subject by Prof. Dov Frimer and Dr. Joel Wolowelsky.



Women at Prayer in Synagogue,

K. Felsenhardt, 1893.

Courtesy of HUC Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles.

Photo by Susan Einstein.

Serious Jews By Mordecai Hurwich-Kebat

My mother, Judith Kaufman Hurwich, would often say, “There are two kinds of Jews—those who are serious, and those who are not” What she meant by “serious Jews” were those whose Jewishness is not a separate thread of their existence, but, rather, is central to their identity and a significant facet of all they do. Serious Jews insist on consistency between their Jewish and secular values and actions, as it is written: “וְחַי בָּהֶם” (“... and he shall live by them”, Leviticus, 18:5). And serious Jews do not merely go through the motions of observance, but also ponder the why and wherefore of what they practice and the meaning of what they pray.

Both my grandmothers, Leah Konowitz Hurwich and Rita Skidelsky Kaufman, were born in Europe and raised in the US, and both of them were Jewishly well-educated and could read Hebrew fluently. So while most of their companions in the *ezrat nashim* (women’s section) could do little more than strain to hear the sounds of the men’s *davening* wafting over the *mechitzah*—they could *daven* themselves, and probably understood the content of their prayers better than most of the men. Out of such understanding, Savta Leah chose to skip over

“רצה...והשב את העבודה לדביר ביתך”
 (“Be favorable ... and restore the service to your holy Temple”) in the *amidah*, and Nana would leave out the passage
 “נער הייתי גם זקנתי, ולא ראיתי צדיק נעזב וזרעו מבקש לחם”
 (“I was a youth and also have aged, and I have not seen a righteous man forsaken, with his children begging for bread”) at the end of *birkhat hamazon*.



Daughters of Israel,
 Leopold Pilchowski, 1925.
 Courtesy of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.
 Photo by David Harris.

Savta Leah did not live to see the blossoming of women’s learning and *tefillah* groups—though she had herself instituted these sixty years ago at Camp Yavneh, which she founded in 1944. Nana, though, did participate in her granddaughters’ and several of her great-granddaughters’ ground-breaking *bat mitzvah* celebrations. She also davened in women’s *tefillah* groups and attended classes at New York’s Drisha Institute and Jerusalem’s MaTaNa, which her daughters were instrumental in founding. Infused with learning and knowledge, both my grandmothers brought these to bear on their Jewishness, and as such were role models—for both women and men—of serious Jews.

“Serious Jews insist on consistency between their Jewish and secular values and actions.”

Just as there are serious Jews, so too, are there serious Jewish congregations. To me, Jerusalem’s *Kehillat Shira Hadasha*—in which my and my sister Ariel’s families are active members—and the process by which *Shira Hadasha* was established and fashioned, exemplifies a serious Jewish congregation. *Shira Hadasha* is an Orthodox congregation in which the *mechitzah* runs down the center aisle, separating the men’s and women’s sections to either side of it. The congregants are *Shabbat*-observant and include a dozen or so Orthodox rabbis, numerous Orthodox Jewish educators and teachers in religious schools. But unlike normative Orthodox congregations, women and men serve on every committee; women get *aliyot*, *lain*, lead the parts of the service that do not *halakhically* require the presence of ten men—*Kabbalat Shabbat*, *Pesukei de-Zimra* and the removal and replacing of the Torah in the *Aron Kodesh*—and the women of course deliver *divrei Torah*. A bride is just as likely as a groom to read the *haftarah* before her wedding. Little girls lead the singing of *An’im Zemirot*—so many Orthodox women’s first childhood memory of discrimination—and a girl celebrating her *bat mitzvah* is given equal status to a boy celebrating his *bar mitzvah*.

My daughter, Ronni, celebrated her *bat mitzvah* on (*Shushan*) Purim two years ago, by *laining* all of *Megillat Esther* and delivering a *shiur* based on her study of Tractate *Megillah*. She is now a very talented and very lovely *ba’alat keriah*, and I get a kick out of splitting the *laining* of a *parsha* with her. My wife, Abby, had marked her *bat mitzvah* some twenty-seven years ago with a birthday party, as was then the custom. Last year, she set things right by marking her birthday with a celebration of her being a *bat mitzvah*; Abby *lained* a few *aliyot* from her would-have-been *bat mitzvah parsha*—*Shemot* (Ronni and I split the rest of the *laining*)—and went on to deliver a beautiful, thoughtful *d’var Torah*.

Women’s expanded participation is certainly the most striking feature of *Shira Hadasha*, but it was not really the point of the *Shira Hadasha* initiative. Rather, the congregation was founded in pursuit of a truer, more meaningful *tefillah*, and women’s expanded participation was a necessary corollary of that design. In other words, “it is not about the women,” rather it is about the entire congregation and its practice of *halakhic* Judaism. The process by which *Shira Hadasha* pushed the *halakhic* envelope of women’s participation in leading the *tefillah* was itself a mark of seriousness, as it was one of autonomous communal study and consent¹—representing a serious regard for understanding and interpreting the *halakha*, and a refreshing, revived “meta-*halakhic*” process too-long absent in the Orthodox world.²

What I find particularly exciting about *Shira Hadasha*, is the prospect that it will become a model for change in modern Orthodoxy in general. As in *Shira Hadasha*, modern Orthodoxy's approach to women and women's issues should not be viewed as being about women; it is about the entire modern Orthodox community—its ethic and its interpretation and practice of *halakha*. The modern Orthodox establishment's tackling of the many women's issues now brought to light could similarly wake up the too-long-dormant meta-*halakhic* process, and forge the way to a newly attuned and relevant rabbinic leadership.

Our awakening to the place of women in our ritual and community has made us take a closer look at what we have been mechanically doing and saying for centuries past. And as serious Jews, we have finally noted and taken umbrage at "ברוך אתה... שלא עשני אשה" ("Blessed are You... for not having made me a woman"); we have "rediscovered" our mothers in being called to the Torah; we've dispensed with "...ושקצונו כטומאת הנידה" ("... and they have detested us as the defilement of *niddah*") in *tahanun*, and "על שלוש עבירות נשים מתות בשעת לידתן" ("For three transgressions women die in childbirth") in *ba'me madlikin* in the Friday night service; and we have recognized our women (and children) as members of our congregations in the *Mi she'berakh* for the congregation after the Shabbat Torah reading, i.e., we recite "ברוך את כל הקהל הקדוש הזה... הם וכל אשר להם" ("...shall bless this entire congregation... them and all of theirs") rather than "הם, ונשיהם ובניהם..." ("them, their wives and children...").

It was taking what we pray seriously that led my mother to

recognize the dissonance implicit in her ever-repeating prayers that God return us to Israel, when she was entirely free to do so. In explaining their decision to make *aliyah* in more universal terms, she and my father would quote Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr:

If life is action and passion, then one who has not lived the action and passion of his times cannot be said to have lived at all.

There is no question that the status of women is one of the critical issues in modern Orthodoxy, and that no Orthodox Jew can be said to have seriously lived these times if he or she has not lived the action and passion that is Jewish Orthodox feminism. I hope, though, that as an added blessing of the Jewish Orthodox feminist movement, a growing number of its members and supporters appreciate, as my parents did, that the very same sensibilities underlying their pro-feminism motivate them to live the ultimate action and passion of our times—here in Israel.

Mordecai Hurwich-Kehat came to Israel at the age of 10 when his family made aliyah in 1968. He served in the Israeli Air Force for twenty two years, and is now a partner in Koshertreks. He and his family live in Jerusalem.

¹ Based upon Rabbi Mendel Shapiro's landmark essay—*Qeri'at ha-Torah* by Women: A Halakhic Analysis, *The Edah Journal*, 1:2.

² Such as has long been practiced by *Shira Hadasha's* spiritual parent congregation – *Kehillat Yedidya* of Jerusalem.

Conscientious Consciousness

By Joel B. Wolowelsky

The invitation to write "From the Other Side of the *Mechitzah*" is an opportunity to observe and yet remain apart, to be involved in a discussion and yet not be a full participant. Paradoxically, the view from the "other side" is sometimes simultaneously clearer and yet more clouded. And this is true no matter from which side of the divide one writes.

Surely the most significant thing to notice from my side of the *mechitzah* is the current proliferation of opportunities for advanced Talmud learning for women. Not only are the institutions dedicated to women's higher learning of texts considered part of mainstream Orthodoxy, but programs leading to formal certification as *to'annot rabbaniyot* (rabbinical pleaders) or *yo'atzot halakha* (*halakhic* advisors) are becoming accepted and respected. The implications of this are vast and far-reaching. In the modern Orthodox community, we are long past the point when women learning Talmud was controversial, and we will soon reach the point where it will be commonplace to have in our midst women

who are experts in various fields of *halakha* and "learning." This is a great blessing for our generation.

But somehow these programs remind me that years ago, I had written that the jury is still out on women's prayer groups. I think the verdict is now coming in (although some will certainly want to appeal). Of course, if these groups had done nothing more than meet the spiritual needs of their participants and provided opportunities for growth in Torah while remaining within the boundaries of *halakha*, they would have been a success. Indeed, this has surely been the case on a personal level with regard to many individual women, and I do not minimize it at all. But I am speaking of communal success, of impact within the Torah community, of institutional importance and acceptance. I fear that relative to these standards, they have not lived up to their potential, and the cause is neither oppression nor undermining by those who do not support their goals. In fact, the mean-spirited campaign against them may have actually contributed to their extended viability.



Synagogue Mechitzah,
Ulpna K'far Pines, Israel.
Courtesy of Rivkah Lubitch
Collection of Mechitzah
Photographs.
Photo by Reut Lubitch.

I shall discuss in a moment what I think are the reasons for the limited communal success and why I was reminded of this issue at this time. But let me say, first, why I have come to this opinion, especially inasmuch as I had originally thought that they might have had great

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promise. The number of *tefillah* groups has hardly increased dramatically over the years. I teach in a yeshivah where all the young women take the same Talmud courses as the young men, and yet when talking with students I find virtually zero interest among them for even trying out women's prayer groups. I have not made a scientific study, but I have the distinct impression that few of the women who attend the most serious advanced study programs—especially in Israel—take much interest in these prayer groups.

That does not mean that these groups have not enriched the religious lives of many of their participants. Indeed, I have been moved by women describing the positive impact of coming into close contact with a *sefer Torah* for the first time as they were called to read from it. Such positive impact cannot be dismissed lightly. Women who dance with fervor at a wedding *simcha* have every reason to do so on *Simchat Torah*, and there is no reason for them not to dance with a *sefer Torah*. Certainly there is no logic for mothers coming to a mid-morning reading of *Megillat Esther* to hear it read by the lone man in the room rather than by capable women. Why, then, my hesitancy about the prayer groups?

There may be many reasons for the lack of growth of these groups, but two stand out for me, one positive and the other negative. I hesitate to mention the negative, because I do not mean to impugn the motivation of the serious women whose search for religious growth has brought them to these groups. But there is, I believe, a contrived quality of some of what goes on at these groups that undermines its otherwise genuine character. I refer most specifically to the *berakha* said at the Torah reading and the pseudo-repetition of the *Amidah* done at many of the groups. I am not referring here to some specific *halakhic* objection—let us posit that the requisite *halakhic* technical requirements have been met—but to the way I think it detracts from how the group speaks to women involved in serious Torah learning.

Everyone agrees that the *berakha*, *Asher Bahar Banu* (“who has chosen us....”) that is said before the Torah reading cannot be said at these groups because no *minyan* is present. But there is a *berakha* that sounds just like it—one that has the exact same words—that everyone (men and women) say each morning. So some women do not say it in the morning and wait to say it at the time of their *aliyah* so that it looks like the real *berakha*. But Torah cannot be

studied in the morning before the daily *berakha* is said. So we have women assiduously refraining from studying or reading any Torah scholarship the whole morning—sometimes the whole day before a *minhah* service—so that they can *appear* to be saying the same *berakha* that men do. Surely this cannot sound right to people who are engaged in serious Torah study. A similar reaction

“Talmud Torah Keneged Kulam, the study of Torah outweighs them all.”

relates to the *hazzanit* waiting to say her private *Amidah* after everyone has finished their own so that selections from the prayers can be sung communally in what appears to be *hazarat ha-shatz* (the repetition of the leader). What is wrong in just singing together as a form of religious expression? The fact that leaders of these groups have not been willing to deal with these and similar issues undermines their appeal. It is not enough to simply say that technical objections cannot be made against these practices.

The positive reason relates to the

explosion of serious Torah study for women, and that is why this all came to mind at this time. Having contact—physical and personal—with a *sefer Torah* can truly be a moving experience. But such contact cannot compare with the opportunity to grapple with Torah that is newly available. I think that is why these groups do not appeal to many younger women.

My guess is that these groups will not grow further unless they address these issues and align themselves more with serious Torah study. On an institutional level, JOFA should now turn to more serious endorsement and encouragement of these advanced learning programs. One possibility might be the development of a Society of Learned Women, parallel somehow to, say, the Society of Actuaries, with graduated exams, syllabi and ratings, giving women a goal-oriented structured learning program. While prayer groups have probably done an important job of raising consciousness in the past, conscientious learning might now be more the required order of the day. *Talmud Torah keneged kulam*, the study of Torah outweighs them all (*Mishnah Pe'ah*, Chapter 1).

Joel B. Wolowelsky is the author of *Women, Jewish Law and Modernity: New Opportunities in a Post-Feminist Age* (Ktav Publishing House, 1997) and teaches at the Yeshivah of Flatbush.



Lincoln Square Beit Midrash, New York. Photo by Joshua Newman.

"Open Closed Open"

Open Closed Open¹ is a collection of poems by Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000). Written in his sixties and seventies, the poems combine fragments of personal and Jewish history to form a verse narrative that is both an autobiography of the poet and a description of the world in which he

grew up and lived. In the first excerpted section below, Amichai depicts the *mechitzah* of his childhood synagogue as a barrier to both men and women. He recalls being strongly drawn to the women's side. For him, his mother and the Orthodox women behind the *mechitzah* are bearers not only of love

and true emotion, but of a special wisdom. Amichai's appreciation of the feminine in Judaism and in life is apparent from his comparison in the second section of the Torah scrolls to women in their finery. JOFA is grateful to Mordecai Hurwich-Kehat for bringing these excerpts to our attention.

I studied love in my childhood in my childhood synagogue
in the women's section with the help of the women behind the partition
that locked up my mother with all the other women and girls.
But the partition that locked them up locked me up
on the other side. They were free in their love while I remained
locked up with all the men and boys in my love, my longing.
I wanted to be there with them and to know their secrets
and say with them, "Blessed be He who has made me
according to His will." And the partition—
a lace curtain white and soft as summer dresses, swaying
on its rings and loops of wish and would.
Lu-lu loops, lullings of love in the locked room.
And the faces of women like the face of the moon behind the cloud
or the full moon when the curtain parts; an enchanted
cosmic order. At night we said the blessing
Over the moon outside and I
thought about the women.

I studied love in the synagogue of my childhood.
I sang "Come O Sabbath bride" on Friday nights
with a bridegroom's fever, I practiced longing for the days of the Messiah,
I conducted yearning drills for the days of yore that will not return.
The cantor serenades his love out of the depths.
Kaddish is recited over lovers that remain together.
The male bird dresses up in a blaze of color.
And we dress the rolled-up Torah scrolls in silken petticoats
And gowns of embroidered velvet
held up by narrow shoulder straps.
And we kiss them as they are passed around the synagogue
Stroking them as they pass, as they pass,
as we pass.

למדתי אהבה בילדותי בבית הכנסת של ילדותי
בעזרת הנשים בעזרת הנשים שמאחורי המחצה
שכלאה את אמי עם כל הנשים והנערות.
אבל המחצה שכלאה אותן, כלאה אותי מן הצד השני,
הן היו חפשויות באהבתן ואני נשארתי
כלוא עם כל הגברים וכל הנערות באהבתי ובכמהייתי,
ורציתי להיות אתן שם ולדעת את סודותיהן
ולברך "ברוך שעשני כרצוני" אתן. והמחצה,
וילון מלמלה לבן ורך כשמלות קיץ והוילון
זו הלך ושוב בטבעות ובלולאות,
לו לו לו לולאות, לו לו, קולות אהבה בחדר הסגור.
ופני הנשים כפני הלבנה שמאחורי העננים
או המלאה בהפתח הוילון כמו במערכת
קוסמית קסומה. ובלילה ברכנו ברכת
הלבנה בחוץ ואני חשבתי על הנשים.

למדתי אהבה בבית הכנסת של ילדותי:
שרתי, בואי כלה, בואי כלה בלילות שבת
ברגשת חתן, התאמנתי בכמהייה לימות המשיח
ועשיתי תרגילי נענועים לימי קדם שלא ישובו.
וממעמקים שר החזן את אהבתו
וקדיש אומרים על אוהבים שנשארים יחדו
ובשלל צבעים מתקשטת צפור הזכר.
ובתחתוניות משי מלבישים ספרי תורה מגלגלים
ועליהן שמלות קטיפה רקומה
מחזקות בכתפיות דקות.
ולנשק בעברם מארון הקדש אל הבמה
וללטף בעברם בעברם, בעברנו.

¹ יהודה עמיחי, פתוח סגור פתוח, שוקן, תל אביב 1998 ע' 17-18

Yehuda Amichai, *Open Closed Open: Poems*: ed. Drenka Willen; trans. Chana Bloch & Chana Kronfeld, (Harcourt, New York) 2000, p.46-47. The first stanza is discussed in David Sperber, *Women Pray on Their Own: The Spiritual and Cultural World of Women in the Light of Jewish Art*, (Jerusalem) 2002, p.24.

An Inheritance For Us All By Mendel Shapiro

I suppose I would describe myself as an Orthodox feminist "fellow traveler;" one who sympathizes with the goals of Orthodox Jewish feminism, but for whom the feminist effort is not at the core of his religious life. By upbringing and intuition, my attitudes are abidingly traditional and, despite the deep inspiration and great personal satisfaction that I get from *davening* at *Shira Hadasha*, I continue to feel comfortable and "at home" *davening* in a "regular" Orthodox synagogue. I believe that absolute,

unique truth is the singular attribute of the Holy One (Blessed be He), and I hold most of my opinions tentatively and as subject to review. Yet, in June 2001, I published an article in the *Edah Journal* advocating that women be included in the Torah reading portion of the synagogue service.¹ What could drive a person such as me to publish an article that I knew could radically alter the face of the Orthodox synagogue?

Together with my traditionalism, I hold a cluster of other attitudes that,

from time to time, manage to overturn my traditionalist equilibrium. First, I seem to be possessed by a strong inclusive impulse. In my paper, I argue that *halakha* in many cases expresses an "inclusive bias" that widens the circle of those included in the observance of *mitzvot*. But beyond the formal case that can be made for this "inclusive bias," I find that it is a principle that has a strong hold on me personally. I recall decades ago saying casually at the end of a meal with a male friend and another woman that we would not say *birkhat hamazon* with a *zimmun* because there were not

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three “people” at the table. Even after I recovered from the immediate social blunder, the incident weighed on my mind as I wondered what could I have been thinking, or from what perspective I was acting, when I made such a thoughtless remark. I recall as well feeling excluded the first time we had a women’s *zimmun* at our *shabbat* table and at a *bat mitzvah* celebration when I, along with other male attendees, was asked to leave for the *kri’at hatorah* portion of the *Shabbat minhah* service that the girl was to read.

Others may have reacted differently to these experiences, but for me not to be counted or recognized makes me feel excluded. Of course, no one has the right to be every place at every time. There are any of a number of *halakhic* and other generally recognized exclusionary principles—the right to privacy and *tzniut*, just to name a few. However, as someone who deals with women professionally and socially on an easy and equal basis, and who takes his own participation in *halakhic* observance as a matter of natural right, these particular incidents made me uncomfortable, and I do not want to make others feel that way. “What is hateful to you, do not do to your friend: that is the whole Torah” (*Shabbat* 31a). Thus, when I was approached with the suggestion that my daughter read the *torah* and the *haftarah* at her *bat mitzvah* just as her brothers did at their *bar mitzvah* celebrations, I felt impelled to consider the issue with the utmost seriousness.

I am also committed to pluralism generally and *halakhic* pluralism in particular. Pluralism is a naughty word in some Orthodox circles and, if it is construed as cultural relativism or as an “I’m OK you’re OK” or *laissez-faire* attitude towards observance, I too join in the objections. To me, *halakhic* observance, in addition to being a way to exercise social discipline and unifor-

mity, is the main religious avenue for personal *avodat hashem*, or service of God. This means that different people and communities will bring distinct nuances, meanings and forms of self-expression to their observance. The Talmud (*Yomah* 69b) recounts how the Men of the Great Assembly restored the “divine crown to its ancient completeness” by reinterpreting the prayer so that the words “the great, the mighty and the awful God” could be restored to the *amidah* after they had been deleted by the prophets Jeremiah and Daniel after witnessing the suffering of the destruction. At the end of this remarkable passage, the Talmud wonders: By what right did Jeremiah and Daniel abrogate the form of prayer established by Moses? The answer: “Since [Jeremiah and Daniel] knew that the Holy One, blessed be He, insists on truth, they would not ascribe false things to Him.” Full *halakhic* observance demands adherence to imposed, formal systems and, at the same time, loyalty to one’s own existential truth. This is a sure fire formula for (hopefully creative) tension and turmoil, but it is not easy being a Jew.

All in all, I think the Orthodox community is true to this religious model (including the tension and turmoil aspects). We encounter examples of it all the time. Some say *Hallel* on *Yom Ha’atzma’ut* while others refuse to do so. Some forbid secular studies; others require it. Some prohibit mixed seating at social functions, while others permit it. One could go on and on. Each side supports its position with classical, traditional *lamdanut* (scholarship). Cynics would say that this shows that *halakha* is just politics or social engineering by another means. Others will insist that *halakha* is indeed the result of necessary conclusions that are derived from irrefutable sources and that these differences are either uncharacteristic of the system, or the result of genuine differences of textual interpretation detached from the underlying worldview or social mores of the various groups. To me, these examples show that the

Orthodox community has, at least *de facto*, recognized a principle of *halakhic* self-determination. I am uncomfortable being separated from my wife at a wedding; others would feel uncomfortable if the seating were mixed. Each of us is entitled to be comfortable in his or her *halakhic* skin and, to support our points of view, we each engage in a classical *halakhic* process that respects both our common



Synagogue Mechitzah, Nir Etzion, Israel. Courtesy of Rivkah Lubitch Collection of Mechitzah Photographs. Photo by Rivkah Lubitch.

received texts and our distinct existential attitudes.

From this point of view, my article on women and Torah reading can be seen as a proposal that Orthodox Jewish feminists enjoy the same measure of *halakhic* self-determination enjoyed by other groups in the Orthodox community. It is too early to tell whether, or to what extent, this proposal will be accepted. Much depends on how well the *halakhic* argument is pressed and the existential needs articulated. There has, however, been an encouraging start.

Finally, my drive to have my paper published reflects my view that everyone has the right to bring his or her Torah or *halakhic* opinions to the communal *Beit Midrash* for debate and discussion. Of course, no one can demand that his or her view be accepted and, given the often strident and testy nature of Orthodox discourse, one should be prepared for the reception that unconventional views can receive. I accept as well that, as in any other discipline, the opinion of those regarded as experts will naturally carry great weight. Nonetheless, in trying to get my paper published I was disturbed by the degree of censorship (including self-censorship) to which *halakhic* discussion is subject in the Orthodox community, almost as if Torah was an esoteric subject that can be understood only by the initiated, and that in judging the validity of a *halakhic* argument the merits should be among the last things to consider. “Moses commanded us a Torah, the inheritance of the Congregation of Jacob” (Deuteronomy 33:4). The Torah is the inheritance of all of us, and we should each do what we can to claim it.

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¹ Mendel Shapiro, “*Qeri’at ha-Torah by Women: A Halakhic Analysis*,” *The Edah Journal* 1:2 (Sivan 5761).



Synagogue Mechitzah, Kibbutz Lavie, Israel. Courtesy of Rivkah Lubitch Collection of Mechitzah Photographs. Photo by Elisheva Oberman.

I Am Not A Feminist *By Paul Serkin*

I am the youngest of three sons. No sisters. I never learned that boys and girls have different roles in the family. There were no girls. I washed dishes, did laundry, vacuumed, dusted, and did whatever chores I was asked to do.

But I am not a feminist.

I was very active in NCSY, our co-ed youth group, in my small community. We did everything together—attended *shiurim*, went to *shabbatonim*, planned events, spent *shabbat* afternoons at each other's homes. There were no differences that I could see. Everybody, boys and girls, participated in the same activities.

I left high school after three years and went to Yeshiva University. I became an advisor in NCSY and attended *shabbatonim* in various cities. I talked to the boys; I talked to the girls. I became a youth advisor in a *shul*. I taught and I listened; I made friends with the high school students. Boys and girls—it made no difference.

But I am not a feminist.

I met the woman of my dreams, the woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. We planned our future. We planned our wedding—traditional roles for her, traditional roles for me. That's what we planned.

Because I am not a feminist.

Our first daughter was born when my wife was still in college. We shared the work—bathing, diapering, and entertaining. We were partners in raising her. Why not? She was my daughter too. We shared because it was the right thing to do, regardless of tradition.

But I am not a feminist.

We helped start a new *shul* in Brooklyn, where we lived. We created it to be a place where women could feel comfortable and could hear the *davening* and *laining* if they chose to, a place to which we could proudly bring all of our children, not just our son, so that they could learn to *daven*. I set up the *shul* furnishings and the *mechitzah* to ensure that the women could see and hear everything that was going on during the service. I encouraged the men to respect the *ezrat nashim* (women's section) in the same way they expected their side to be respected. If our side was the *shul*, the other side was also.

But I am not a feminist.

Our three children grew up. We grew up. The time came for our older daughter's *bat mitzvah*. It was to be the first *bat mitzvah* in our *shul*. It never occurred to us that it should be significantly different from the *bar mitzvot* which had taken place at the *shul*. Our daughter would not *lain* or get an *aliyah*, but, of course, she would give a *d'var Torah* from the *bimah*. Of course one of her parents would speak to her, and let the whole *shul* listen. We felt that the logical choice for this was her

mother, just as I would be the logical choice at our son's *bar mitzvah*. Nothing can compare to that special relationship between mother and daughter, except maybe the one between father and son. We did this because it made sense, and we were surprised when some of the members of the *shul* disapproved.

Because, after all, I am not a feminist.

By this time my wife had become a regular at the Flatbush Women's Davening Group, a monthly gathering of women who want to enhance their relationship with God and *tefillah* and to take a more active role in the service. It never occurred to me to do anything but support her in this.

But I am not a feminist.

Our *shul* grew and acquired a second *sefer Torah*. Controversy erupted. Previously, with only one *sefer Torah*, *hakafot* on *Simchat Torah* were held on the men's side of the *shul*. Now we had two Torah scrolls. The new one was purchased with funds raised from all members, both men and women and, not unreasonably, many of the women felt strongly that they should be able to carry one of the *sifrei Torah* for *hakafot* on their side of the *mechitzah*. Not surprisingly, a great many members, both men and women, objected just as strongly.

With the help of the *rav*, the *shul* undertook a review of all the pertinent *halakhot*. His *pesak* (decision) was simple. It was clearly permitted for woman to touch and hold a *sefer Torah*. There were clear guidelines by which women could have *hakafot* with a *sefer Torah*. As a member of the board, my obligation was to all members of the *shul*. Granting this simple request would in no way detract from our *shul*; it could only enhance it. I voted yes. However, for many familiar reasons the vote did not pass. "It just is not done." "It has not been done before." "We did not do it in the old country." "It will hurt your chances for a *shidduch*." I disagreed. When a course of action is permitted and is desired by many members, we should not allow reasons having nothing to do with *halakha* to influence us. It was a simple matter of following *halakha* and nothing more.

Because I am not a feminist.

From controversy and discord can come great good. A friend told us about a *shul* that would be willing to lend a *sefer Torah* to us for the purpose of women's *hakafot*. While no *shul* could be convinced to permit the permitted, we were lucky enough to have a large living room. That *Simchat Torah*, and every *Simchat Torah* since, about 50 women hold, in that living room, what are probably the most lively *hakafot* in our Brooklyn neighborhood. One of our daughter's teachers asked my wife rather dubiously, when she heard of this, cocking her head in my direction, "And he lets?" At first neither of us could quite grasp her meaning; the idea of my controlling the form my wife's *tefillah* should take was at the same time completely foreign and patently ludicrous.

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**Live Outside North America? Feel Isolated?
Want to Communicate with Others who Share
your Interests in Women's Tefillah, Learning, etc.?**

In response to many requests, Gael Hammer of Sydney, Australia, is developing a world-wide (outside N. America) JOFA network to provide support for women seeking increased participation in Orthodox religious life and ritual.

Please email your name, street, address, phone/fax numbers and email address to Gael at hammerg@tpg.com.au, and pass this message on to others who might be interested.

**Remember to visit
our new website
www.jofa.org
which is updated
regularly.**

Expanding the Palace of Torah

By Tamar Ross

Brandeis University Press, University Press of New England 2004 \$65.00 (hardback) \$29.95 (paperback)

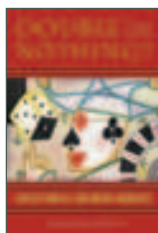


JOFA members need no introduction to Tamar Ross, who has graced our conferences as a spellbinding presenter for many years, beginning with the first conference in 1997. Associate Professor of Jewish Thought in the Department of Philosophy at Bar-Ilan University and teacher of Jewish thought at Midreshet Lindenbaum, Ross can justly be called one of the major theoreticians of the Orthodox Jewish feminist movement. This book examines the theological implications for Orthodox Judaism of women's changing status in the modern world. How has the women's revolution challenged Orthodox Judaism and how has Orthodox Judaism responded to these challenges? As a strong believer in the authority of the *halakha* way of life, but one who acknowledges the patriarchal orientation of the tradition, Ross puts forward a model of what she terms "cumulative revelation" to incorporate a more pluralistic view of Divine Revelation that can accommodate many of the challenges of feminism, by "expanding the Palace of Torah" (a phrase she draws from Rav Kook). Ross explores the consequences of the development of a critical mass of female Torah scholars on the *halakha* process. Interestingly Ross sees Israel, not America, as the future powerhouse of Orthodox feminism. Ross's wide ranging familiarity with *halakha* and Jewish philosophy, with general feminist readings, both secular and Christian, as well as with legal theory, makes this book a challenging read, but an immensely valuable one for close study.

Double or Nothing? Jewish Families and Mixed Marriage

By Sylvia Barack Fishman

Brandeis University Press, University Press of New England. 2004. \$24.95



Sylvia Barack Fishman, an active JOFA Board member, heads the program in Contemporary Jewish Life in the Near Eastern and Judaic Studies Department at Brandeis University and is co-director of the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute. Her book, "A Breath of Life: Feminism in the American Jewish Community," is an invaluable guide to American Jewish feminism. Her most recent work, "Double or Nothing?" deals with the impact of intermarriage on American Jews and on American Judaism. The fluidity and openness of American culture means that often both partners maintain their pre-marriage religious identity. Using her analysis of 254 original interviews with mixed marriage families, group discussions, as well as the latest survey data from the 2000 National Population Survey, Professor Fishman skillfully explores the impact of this phenomenon and what it means for the future. Which religion will the children be raised in? What is the role of extended family members and how do the children construct their own ethno-religious identities? She stresses the important role of education in maintaining Jewish affiliation. In a fascinating section Fishman

examines depictions of intermarriage in contemporary films, books and television. This book is a serious and valuable analysis of a phenomenon that is changing the parameters of American Jewish life.

The Flying Camel: Essays on Identity by Women of North African and Middle Eastern Jewish Heritage

By Loolwa Khazzoom, editor

Seal Press, 2003 \$16.95 (paperback)

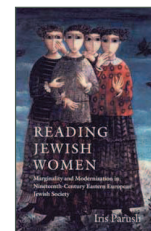


This book explores the experiences of Jewish women from North African and Middle Eastern backgrounds. The variety of well-written essays introduces readers to the worlds of a range of women, mainly non-Orthodox, who grapple with issues of multiple identities as well as of survival. One woman writes of her flight from persecution in Libya in 1967; another of a massacre in Iraq. An Iranian woman living in Los Angeles discusses the continuities in attitudes to children, women and giving birth in traditional Iranian culture, even for those transplanted from their homeland. An Iraqi woman describes how her grandmother arriving in Israel from Iraq in the 1950's was convinced that the Ashkenazi Jews who now surrounded her were European Christians. A woman born in Petach Tikva to parents who had arrived in the Flying Carpet immigration from Yemen in 1949 relates her experiences growing up as a Yemenite in Israel, where her Ashkenazi peers at school would express surprise that "Mizrachiim" (Eastern Jews) had the capacity to study hard subjects. She describes a "transplanted" traditional Yemenite society in which women were expected to do the domestic work, serve the men on holidays, and rarely came to synagogue, both because of the lack of formal education and because of the culture of passivity. It is fascinating to hear discussions of changes in Orthodoxy in Israel regarding the role of women from a Yemenite perspective. As the writers discuss how they struggle to integrate their heritage into their lives in America, Canada and Israel, this book reminds us of the multiple narratives of Jewish women and of the richness of Jewish culture.

Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society

By Iris Parush

Brandeis University Press, University Press of New England 2004 \$29.95 (paperback)



This book is an extraordinarily rich and unusual window into the society of Jewish women in the nineteenth-century. Iris Parush, who teaches Hebrew Literature at Ben Gurion University of the Negev, offers a historical analysis of reading patterns of Eastern European women. According to Parush, the women enjoyed the "benefit of marginality" precisely because they were denied the skills that would allow them access to the prestigious male world of learn-

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Shabbat T'lamdeini 2004

By Abigail Tambor, Chair, Shabbat T'lamdeini.

To celebrate the contributions women have made to our communities through Torah learning and leadership, JOFA sponsored its fifth annual *Shabbat T'lamdeini* initiative on May 8th, *parshat Emor*. The purpose of the program is to highlight the strides women have made in advanced Jewish scholarship on a very local level. *Shabbat T'lamdeini* encourages individual synagogues to design their own programs to meet the specific needs of their own community. As in previous years, women were invited to speak at a Friday night *oneg*, give a Shabbat morning *drasha*, Shabbat afternoon *shiur*, *se'udah shlishit d'var Torah*, or to act as scholars in residence. This year's program was our most successful to date, with close to 70 synagogues participating. This number included many repeat participants from Canada, Australia, and the US. There were new participants in Houston, TX, Kansas City, MO, three congregations in Teaneck, NJ as well as a *Shabbaton* in Scandinavia and twelve congregations (co-sponsored locally by *Kolech* and *Ne'emanai Torah Ve'Avoda*) in Israel. This is a tremendous leap forward from just over 40 synagogues and congregations that participated last year. In America alone, programs were held in 17 states.

This year's offerings at the various synagogues matched, if not surpassed, previous years in variety of subject matter and depth of scholarship. Many synagogues had multiple women speak during a Shabbat-long dedication to women's scholarship. In Chicago, Lisa Schlaff addressed two separate congregations, *Anshei Sholom* and *Tehilla* (a newly established partnership *minyán*) about women in the ancient synagogue. Her talk was an examination of Rabbinic, Greco-Roman and archeological sources. At *Tehilla*, she even

gave two additional talks on the founding of *Darkhei Noam* (a partnership *minyán* in New York) and Jewish education. Devorah Zlochower, JOFA Board member and Director of Full-Time programs at the Drisha Institute, was invited to Congregation *Kehilath Jeshurun* to speak from the pulpit following Shabbat morning services as well as at *se'udah shlishit*. Her main talk was entitled, "Dress and Gender in Jewish Law," in which she reviewed many of the talmudic and *halakhic* sources dealing with appropriate dress for both men and women in relation to evolving considerations of modesty. She also addressed the congregation at the Great Neck Synagogue a week earlier as part of their *Shabbat T'lamdeini* program.

The response in the aftermath of the program has been resoundingly positive. Synagogues who have participated in *Shabbat T'lamdeini* since its inaugural year reaffirmed their commitment to the event, while new-comers thanked JOFA for sponsoring the program and assured the planning committee that they would participate again next year. Interestingly, among the synagogues that declined to participate, the reason repeatedly given was that since women addressed the congregation all the time, a special program of this type was not necessary for that particular congregation. While JOFA was disappointed by all refusals to participate, we were heartened by the knowledge that for some synagogues, a *d'var Torah* given by a learned woman was hardly anything new.

Building on the success of *Shabbat T'lamdeini*, JOFA is planning to establish a speakers' bureau to meet the increased demand for accomplished women Torah scholars. For next year's *Shabbat T'lamdeini*, May 7, 2005, *parshat Kedoshim*, JOFA hopes to achieve the goal of 100 participating synagogues.

If *Shabbat T'lamdeini* has not yet come to your synagogue and you would like to act as a contact person, please call (212) 679-8500 or email JOFA@JOFA.org.

I Am Not A Feminist ...continued from page 11

But I am not a feminist.

When our younger daughter became *bat mitzvah*, we simply assumed that she would celebrate her *bat mitzvah* by being called to the Torah at the Women's Davening Group. To my surprise, I had to argue strongly with the principal of her modern Orthodox yeshiva to keep him from forbidding the girls in her class to attend. In the end, my daughter also *lained*, led *birkhat hamazon* after *se'udah shlishit* (third meal on Shabbat) and recited *havdalah* when Shabbat ended, in the company of nearly all of her friends. I went to *shul* with the other men for *minhah* and *se'udah shlishit*.

After all, I am not a feminist.

When the Flatbush Women's Davening Group needed to relocate, my wife offered our home. It was a topic we had discussed, and we knew that it was an ideal location for the group. For over two years they have met in our home every *Shabbat Mevarchim* (Shabbat before Rosh Hodesh). I set up the room before I leave for *shul*. I roll the *sefer Torah*, prepare the

siddurim and *chumashim* and even prepare *kiddush*. It says in Proverbs 14:28, *B'rov am hadras Melekh*, in a group of people, the king is exalted. In other words, a gathering of a large group of people brings honor to God. I regard my participation in this women's gathering as part of the *mitzvah* of service that applies in any synagogue. Moreover, if my wife held a Tupperware party I would help; how much more so this holy gathering?

Even though I am not a feminist.

Supporting my wife and my daughters in their various pursuits and paths within Judaism has been my privilege and pleasure. Just as they support my *shul* attendance and participation in Jewish communal activities, I support theirs. I am a supportive and loving husband and father. I am *frum*—modern Orthodox. I am not radical; in fact quite conservative in many ways. But most of all—I am not a feminist.

Perhaps, however, a feminist is what I am.

Paul Serkin is a computer consultant who lives in Brooklyn, New York. He and his wife are the proud parents of three children.

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ing. Many women learned to read Yiddish in informal settings for different reasons—for prayers, for business—but often also for pleasure, and unlike men were freer to choose the material they read. Except for the Talmudic elite, men mostly were taught to read mechanically to fulfill ritual duties. Because of their role as breadwinners which necessitated increased interaction with non-Jews, women often were allowed to study foreign languages and gain a secular education, whereas traditional men were not. Consequently, it was often the female readers who

introduced their husbands to the world of European classics and to secular modern culture. With fascinating details about girls' secular and Jewish education and revealing extracts from memoirs and novels, Parush underlines the crucial role of women in spreading the spirit of the Enlightenment and modernization throughout East European Jewish society. Interestingly, this is the obverse of the situation that we know that Sara Schenirer sought to address in the early twentieth century—the loss of religious attachments by many young girls who lacked a strong traditional Jewish education.

Mission Statement of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance

The Alliance's mission is to expand the spiritual, ritual, intellectual, and political opportunities for women within the framework of *halakha*. We advocate meaningful participation and equality for women in family life, synagogues, houses of learning, and Jewish communal organizations to the full extent possible within *halakha*. Our commitment is rooted in the belief that fulfilling this mission will enrich and uplift individual and communal life for all Jews.

☐ **COUNT ME IN!** I want to support JOFA's work and have an opportunity to be part of a community striving to expand meaningful participation for women in Jewish life.

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