

# A Woman in the Mirror: Conservative Judaism Faces Feminism

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At a time when efforts are being made to eradicate discrimination between the sexes . . . the differences between the sexes are being rediscovered . . . it is difficult to say “different” without saying “better” or “worse” . . .

Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*

On the day when the Seminary faculty voted to admit women to the Rabbinical School, a handful of students and our wives gathered to celebrate this milestone in the history of our movement. The occasion was subdued. This long-awaited moment was dampened by the prevailing atmosphere of sadness and regret which pervaded the Seminary building that day. Teachers had declared a day of introspection and prayer, threats of walkouts circulated, and acrimonious charges were exchanged. In spite of the mood, those who had long championed egalitarianism in principle and who had argued for women’s ordination on moral grounds felt that their ultimate objective had been achieved: women and men were now equal in Conservative Judaism, with equal rights and equal opportunities.

In these pages, I will suggest that our movement’s steps towards egalitarianism do not represent the attainment of any final feminist goal. The Conservative movement is indeed in the slow but irreversible process of removing halakhic impediments to equality for women and men in Judaism.<sup>1</sup> Still, numbers of crucial questions remain unanswered and such steps towards equal rights and opportunities as have been taken, though substantial and important, do not indicate the acceptance of a feminist agenda. Such a development remains for the future and offers Conservative Judaism unprecedented opportunities for reevaluation and dynamic growth. This essay considers,

therefore, what might be gained from embracing the feminist opportunity in the areas of synagogue life, halakhah, theology, prayer, ritual, and scholarship.

### **Feminism As Opportunity**

. . . (W)e believe that the most exciting and important development in contemporary Judaism has been the emergence of a movement for women's liberation . . . Our commitment to women's liberation means much more than a simple equality—it means reclaiming the parts of women's experiences that have been lost or repressed, learning from the insights of women . . . supporting the explorations of women as they develop new rituals and new ways of being Jewish and new forms of political and social actions, and understanding that women's liberation is not just about women but about a transformation in what it means to be a human being.

Michael Lerner, "Why *Tikkun*?"

Feminism is a consciousness, a way of (re-)reading, (re-)acting and (re-)telling our tradition from perspectives that have been hidden because of the marginalization of Jewish women by the classical rabbinic tradition and its successors in the modern era. As the diversity of modern Jewish feminism indicates, feminism *per se* mandates no halakhic program, only an openness to women's experiences, women's voices, and women's active participation.<sup>2</sup> Presumably, even those who reject specific instances of equal ritual roles for women and men can find nothing objectionable in this fundamental feminist position.

While women have been admitted to both the Rabbinical and Cantorial Schools, these actions do not reflect a new attitude towards feminism. The summer 1984 issue of *Conservative Judaism*, for example, reveals the extent to which feminism is still seen as a foreign perspective. This issue, devoted to the subject of prayer, omits any contribution by women. More significantly, none of the articles addresses the problem of the male imagery which dominates the language of our prayers or of those life experiences specific to women which continue to be omitted from our liturgy. This gap is highlighted by contrast with a volume on prayer published in *Response* (1981). In this issue, fully half of the contributors are women and

many of the male writers take notice of feminist concerns in their essays. The neglect, of course, is not peculiar to our movement. Even such dedicated egalitarians as the editors of *Back to the Sources* and of *Judaism* magazine's recent issue on contemporary readings of the Bible (Summer 1986) ignore both women writers and feminist responses to the Jewish tradition.

## The Rabbinate

Undoubtedly, many believed that I was studying [to become] a *rebbeztin* rather than a rabbi . . . .

Rabbi Sally Priesand, *Judaism and the New Woman*

When the faculty voted to admit women to the Rabbinical School, students who had entered the Seminary under one set of rules and assumptions suddenly found themselves faced with a new situation that they were inadequately prepared to accept, let alone affirm. As late as 1983, students were being told that women would not be admitted to the Rabbinical School in the near future. Suddenly a new reality emerged. Without a *takkanah* (legislative ruling) to authorize the move, without a rethinking of the structure of learning or the nature of halakhic process, women would be entering an environment that had previously existed for men alone.

The outsider would become insider, but on what terms? The Seminary never answered the fundamental question that had been agitating feminist communities for years: would women enter previously male-dominated fields differently, as women, or as men? Would women be expected to wear tallit and tefillin? Would a woman who rejected the notion of equal obligation (either because she believed in separate ritual roles for women and men or because she did not theologically accept the idea of obligation) be refused admission to the school?<sup>3</sup> Would the presence of women in the classroom lead to new modes of learning and a reevaluation of the curriculum's traditional emphases? In a school with a deeply entrenched system of values and a status system based on the ability to manipulate rabbinic text and on halakhic observance, how would those women fare who entered with alternative sets of skills and interests? During the first transitional years these questions have barely been asked, let alone answered.

As congregations think about hiring women rabbis, a related set

of issues emerges. The laity may value a woman rabbi more as social worker/psychologist than as teacher/*posek*. To some extent, this perception reflects the fact that a number of women rabbis and rabbinical students have training in social work. The danger of this situation is that a rigid set of expectations will be established according to which women rabbis are appreciated for a distinct set of interpersonal skills different from (and invariably valued less than) those of their male colleagues. Inasmuch as the tradition of the male rabbinate extends into antiquity and our movement has established a widely accepted model that dictates which skills make a rabbi a communal leader — how do we expand the current definition of rabbinic leadership without reinforcing prejudice? We might expect that, ultimately, what had been considered distinctions between female and male modes of rabbinic authority will dissolve into an enlarged and improved understanding of the rabbi's role in the community. In the interim, the presence of women in the Rabbinical School, on the Seminary faculty, and in the pulpit rabbinate must be allowed to alter the environment; for women to enter these previously male enclaves as second-class men would be demeaning (to say the least) and ultimately a loss for all concerned.

## Halakhah

What if Rosenzweig had been a woman? Would her experience upstairs behind a heavy curtain in that same Orthodox synagogue have inspired her with similar Jewish commitment? Would the talents and fervor that brought him to a position of religious leadership have brought her to a comparable position?

Susannah Heschel, "Women Before the Law"

Conservative rabbis are fond of telling the (apocryphal?) story of Franz Rosenzweig's return to Judaism, a return inspired by a High Holiday visit to an Orthodox synagogue where he was impressed with the liturgy's full inner power. By conjuring up the image of a female Rosenzweig, Heschel calls upon us to realize that the halakhic system has not accommodated the talents of all Jews at all times. Instead, halakhah has a history and, like all human creations (even divinely inspired ones) it arises out of the life situation of those who translate divine command into human law.

Those who understand the halakhic distinction between women and men as something other than historically conditioned sexism have accordingly used the argument that Judaism, at its best, acknowledges and celebrates difference. According to this view, Judaism is a religious system that creates meaning by sanctifying separation: the dietary laws of Leviticus, the gentile as presented in tractate *Avodah Zarah*, the havdalah liturgy's separation of the Sabbath and the weekday. Women and men function in different realms because Judaism works by legally defining and ritualizing division in all aspects of life. I would point out, however, that each of Judaism's acts of separation is an act of evaluation: the holy Sabbath and the profane week, kosher and *treif*, pure and impure, insider and outsider, subject of the law and object of the law. To claim that women and men must be categorized within this system of oppositions inevitably locates women on the negative side of the balance as outsider, legal object, vehicle of impurity.

Throughout Jewish history, legal reasoning, the ability to develop refinements in the halakhic system in response to new situations, has necessarily been an important talent. Compromise, the blurring of boundaries, and radical change were regarded as potentially dangerous to the social order. The necessity for maintaining this posture has recently been questioned. Twentieth-century America is neither imperial Rome nor Czarist Russia. For the Jew, it has created a new set of problems. We are faced with the need to retain our identity in an open society.

Carol Gilligan has proposed that socialization has made it so that women "are more tolerant in their attitudes toward rules, more willing to make exceptions, and more easily reconciled to innovations" than men.<sup>4</sup> If Gilligan's observations are correct, then we can expect women to initiate new modes of halakhic decision-making, modes that may be more appropriate to current needs. We cannot expect a process that has been closed to women's voices for thousands of years to remain unaffected by the sudden enfranchisement of half of the Jewish world.

Alongside changes in process, changes may be expected in the content of the law as well. Rituals of integration and transition may replace or modify our tradition's nearly exclusive attention to division. New terms and appropriate ritual expressions will have to be developed. Feminists have written extensively about ways to achieve integration without loss of self, and about the unity that can often

underlie diversity. Conservative Judaism needs to build on that experience and profit from that expertise as it designs new strategies for creative Jewish living in America.

## Theology

What if the subordination of women in Judaism is rooted in the ology, in the very foundation of the Jewish tradition?

Judith Plaskow, "The Right Question is Theological"

Classically, Conservative Judaism has embraced halakhic and avoided theological challenges. Our movement has failed to develop widely accepted understandings of God, revelation, theodicy, the meaning of prayer, and other basic theological questions. The work of numerous feminists is already providing the energy and intellectual resources for a creative rethinking of a full range of theological questions that we have eschewed in the past.

As outsiders to the textual tradition, women have noticed and responded to theological omissions that men have long since considered natural and unproblematic. Written with man as the norm and woman as the anomaly to be controlled, rabbinic legal texts cannot be viewed by women as timeless works. Women have had to place halakhot in their historical contexts in order to find them religiously plausible. Biblical texts which narrowly delimit women's activity to domestic space had to be reinterpreted through the re-discovery of Midrash as a technique for reading. The prayer book's language, with its unquestioned use of male imagery to describe a God whom our community increasingly imagines in non-anthropomorphic terms, had to be heard afresh. In each of these areas: law, midrash, and prayer, the questions asked by feminists—how are women imagined by the tradition? How can women's experience contribute to the tradition?—open up vast new areas for revitalizing our theological discourse. The fact that our movement is committed to struggling with problematic texts rather than expelling them from the canon or declaring ourselves to be "post-halakhic" creates an even greater need to learn from those who have been forced for generations to come to terms with such difficulties.

The textual tradition represents only part of our contemporary theological problem. Attending to the voices of women will allow us to develop new theological categories and raise fundamental questions

about accepted ways of doing theology. The historical situation of women includes different experiences of evil in the world which demand explanation, experiences that include this-worldly oppression by Jewish men. Feminist theology, therefore, often bases itself on lived personal experience as a co-equal source for theological reflection beside texts and history. Recovery of this mode of theology may put contemporary (largely rationalist) Judaism in touch with the rich, partially hidden resources of Jewish mysticism. We can fruitfully *and authentically* draw upon mystical literature, which also focuses on lived experience and offers several female God images.

### Prayer and Ritual

So what is the rabbi afraid of? Surely inelegant language and "inauthentic" ritual are used by respectable Jews every day . . . Contemporary Jewish life cannot help but benefit from serious new thought about the nature of authority, spiritual practice, our own needs and natures as female and male *human* beings, and a reconsideration of the historical separation between elite and non-elite religion.

Drorah Setel, "The Contribution Being Spurned"

As in no other area of Jewish life, the impact of feminism on Jewish prayer and ritual demonstrates the value of the feminist opportunity for Judaism. From the bat mitzvah to Rosh Hodesh celebrations to the *simhat bat*, new rituals have been developed and assimilated by our communities. Within a few short years after its introduction into the Ashkenazic scene, for example, the *simhat bat* ritual has increasingly been accepted as halakhically requisite. With no rabbinic rulings and only rare rabbinic assistance, families developed rituals to express their joy on the birth of a daughter and to welcome her into the community. The creation of new prayers, many in English, and the inclusion of personal statements at the *simhat bat* have also led to a rethinking of the *brit milah* ceremony. Now that the ceremony for the entrance of a daughter into the community has become so rich and personal, families are adding new prayers to the older ceremony which had increasingly been taken out of their hands and made the exclusive responsibility of paid professionals.

As the female life-cycle and female experience are increasingly seen as bases for religious responses in our communities, there will be

calls for new rituals and prayers. This appeal to Judaism from contemporary voices provides our movement with a rare opportunity for liturgical creativity in an halakhic framework. Rather than threaten existing structures, new prayers and rituals have the potential for bringing people closer to a tradition that can now be seen as relating more exactly to the experiences of all Jews. Women's ritual, women's prayer groups, and women's study groups can be the proving ground for the development of a renewed sense of closeness to prayer, a sense that has long been missing in our community. As long as we are prepared to acknowledge that the siddur is a collection of male-oriented prayers, that the *beit kenneset* has been a men's prayer center, and the *beit midrash* a male study group, we must welcome the creation by Jewish women of alternative institutions during this period of transition. An open Conservative community prepared to add and grow need not abandon the halakhic framework within which it has traditionally done its liturgical work.

### Recovering Our Past

It is no surprise that the back-to-the-roots variety of Jew of the present decade is not looking for problematic aspects of the tradition. Unfortunately, such is history, particularly when it is about human beings.

Susan Einbinder, "Review of *Back to the Sources*"

One position long maintained by Conservative scholars which feminism *does* challenge is the myth of objectivity in scholarship. Noting that "objective" histories frequently omit the life-experience of half of the population, feminist Jewish scholars, like Jews in general academics, have been calling for the rewriting of standard texts. Blind spots can now be replaced by vision. Students of rabbinic Judaism have long claimed that the life of study followed by male Jews during the medieval period deserved attention alongside the history of political and military developments in the surrounding culture. In similar fashion, feminist historians recognize the limitations of what Jewish history has hitherto valorized. Nearly every standard work on the history of the Jews and the history of Judaism requires rethinking. Sources long forgotten or ignored need to be re-examined so that a history of women's lives can be made part of our teaching. While we

need not criticize the rabbis of the Talmud for not having included women in their deliberations, we can not afford to ignore the significance of that exclusion. By directing our attention to the limitations of our textual tradition and the subjectivity of existing scholarship, this feminist approach frees us from the burden of apologetics while creating new opportunities for rethinking our past and applying history's lessons to our present.

### **Conclusion: Egalitarianism and Pluralism**

Egalitarianism is . . . a principle which we cannot yield in good conscience . . .

Rabbi Albert Axelrad, "Principle Encounters Principle"

During the Seminary's second century, Conservative Judaism has the opportunity to avail itself of the wealth of feminist thinking and practice. The assimilation of feminist insights depends in the first place on the adoption of egalitarianism as the dominant position of the movement. If it is true, as the founders of our movement claimed, that Judaism's classic sources were created in communication with developments in the life of the people, then halakhic change towards the realization of egalitarianism in Judaism represents the workings of classical Judaism in the modern period. The decisions of the Rabbinical Assembly's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards which have moved toward facilitating the development of egalitarian Judaism represent such a development and should be recognized as expressions of a fully *authentic, halakhic, and traditional* Judaism. The perspective which implies that halakhah is monolithic and unchanging in its application represents a radical departure from our movement's teaching and should be named as such.

The Mishnah cites a number of cases limiting the principle of pluralism within the rabbinic movement (see, for example, *Eduyot* 5:6). In our present context, the question arises of how to deal with colleagues who reject the egalitarian perspective as defined by the decisions of the Law Committee and the Seminary admissions committee. I propose the following criterion: an applicant who disagrees with egalitarianism on halakhic principle may be admitted to the rabbinical school. One who denies, however, the legitimacy of our decision-making bodies and the legitimacy of their conclusions regarding the

position of women and men in Judaism will not be able to function within our movement and should be directed elsewhere. The feminist opportunity is an opportunity for self-definition and growth. Pride in our great achievement in creating an halakhic framework for the adoption of egalitarianism and the incorporation of feminist perspectives is well earned. The brightness of our future depends upon our trusting Conservative Judaism to face itself in the woman in the mirror.<sup>5</sup>

### NOTES

1. The next major step will come when the Law Committee reconsiders the question of women as witnesses.

2. See the appended bibliography for a representative selection of books and anthologies whose authors range from traditionalist to post-halakhic/non-halakhic in perspective.

3. While the recent JTS catalog includes the statement: "Women are expected to accept equality of [halakhic] obligation in the performance of *mitzvot*," this principle is not uniformly enforced.

4. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), p. 10.

5. The ideas developed here reflect the outcome of many years of study with my teacher, colleague and friend Lori Lefkowitz. Her guidance has been invaluable, even when conflicting perspectives have led us to different conclusions.

### WORKS CITED AND SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY ON FEMINISM (AND JUDAISM)

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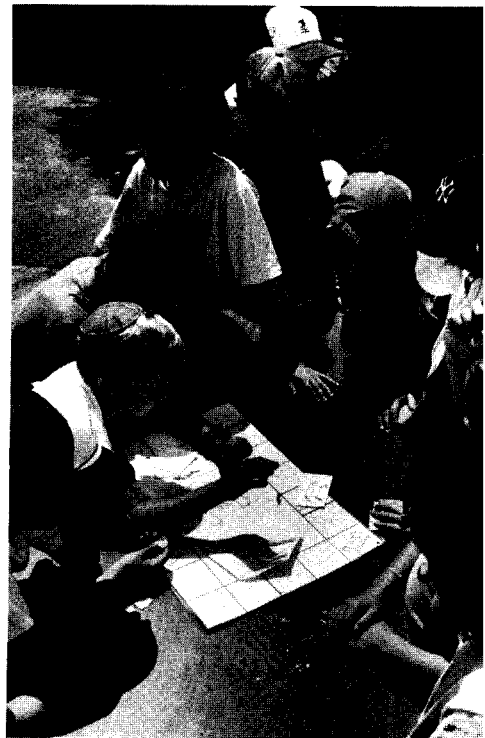
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*At Camp Ramah, 1986.*



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