

Rebbetzin Redux

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Our new BJPA Project Assistant, Jessica Cavanagh-Melhado, was profiled today in the Forward's Sisterhood blog, for her writing (along with co-blogger Melissa Scholten-Gutierrez) at [Redefining Rebbetzin](#).

Melissa: There is this old stereotype of a rebbetzin being a frumpy woman who stays at home, cooking with kids hanging from her skirt — and one look at our blog will tell you that that is far from who we are! A big part of what we're exploring is how people view contemporary rebbetzins and contrast that with this Old World stereotype. I don't think we could have dreamed it would be in the place it is not just a year and a half into it!

Jessica: There's the new phenomenon in the traditional world of women leaders in congregations, and having to figure out the role of their spouses. Those two things together I think formed the kernel of this idea. There is a lot of ground between what women and men out there are experiencing and what the traditional notion is, and that's really interesting. The dynamic of two friends ending up married to two guys who want to be rabbis seemed a little unlikely, given our backgrounds. It really compelled us to share our stories.

What's your definition of feminism? Is this a feminist project?

Melissa: Feminism is about empowering women to be whoever they are, wherever they are, in a way which is fulfilling to them. It's not about being "equal" to men; that implies that women are inherently less than men and we have to do things in a more masculine way to be the best women we can be. Choosing to be a religious working woman who dreams of being able to both work to support her family and to be able to spend the formative years of her (future) children's lives with them is embracing feminism.

Jessica: We're married women living in religious communities that are struggling with the role of women. This is somewhat of a feminist project, since it gives us a platform to grapple with community norms and halachic issues. Child-rearing is a feminist issue; we can't talk about advancing women in positions of power if we don't talk about the lack of affordable child care and helping women create balance in their home lives.

[Read the whole interview here.](#)

Kol hakavod to Jessica -- who, by the way, is not the only rebbetzin on the BJPA staff. Our fearless leader, [BJPA Director Prof. Steven M. Cohen](#), is also a rebbetzin; he is married to Rabbi Marion Lev-Cohen.