Expanding the Jewish Feminist Agenda

Judith Plaskow

Jewish feminists have succeeded in changing the face of Jewish religious life in the United States beyond the wildest dreams of those of us who, in the late 1960s, began to protest the exclusion of women from Jewish religious practice. Thirty years ago, who could have anticipated that, at the turn of the century, there would be hundreds of female rabbis representing three Jewish denominations, untold numbers of female Torah and Haftorah readers, and female cantors and service leaders in synagogues throughout the country?

Who could have imagined that so many girls would expect a full *bat mitzvah* as a matter of course, or that Orthodox women would be learning Talmud, mastering synagogue skills, and functioning as full participants in services of their own?

Equal access to all the roles and responsibilities of Jewish religious life has been — and remains — a hard fight for women in many individual congregations, and it has been far easier to achieve than transformation of the *content* of Jewish liturgy and teaching. Yet even in this more difficult area, there have been steps toward change. Birth ceremonies for baby girls, experimental liturgies, new denominational and alternative prayerbooks reflecting women's presence and/or offering new God-language, feminist *midrash* and commentaries on biblical texts, are all part of the American Jewish scene. It is true that institutionalizing these gains remains an enormous challenge. But enough has been accomplished that it seems appropriate for Jewish feminists to ask, what next?

What is next, I would argue, is moving beyond a single-minded focus on internal religious issues and synthesizing the concerns of religious and secular Jewish feminists. Up until now, there has been a remarkable lack of conversation among feminists addressing religious questions, those criticizing the absence of women's leadership from major Jewish communal organizations, and those working on a host of social and political issues, from racism to poverty to the rights of Palestinians. Even where some of the same people have been active around these different questions, there has been strangely little cross-fertilization in terms of analysis and strategies.

I cannot speak for the secular side, but I think the task of religious feminists in the new millennium is to end this counterproductive division of labor. How can we hope to solidify the gains of the last decades without sophisticated analyses of power in the Jewish community and in the larger society? How do we begin to theorize and act on the ways in which creating a more just Judaism is but a small piece of the larger task of creating a more just world?

Jewish feminists have difficulty transforming Jewish liturgy and integrating the insights of feminist scholarship into Jewish education not simply because of religious barriers but also because of lack of access to power and money. A 1998 study commissioned by Ma'yan, The Jewish Women's Project in New York, documented the deplorable absence of women from the boards of major Jewish organizations. Of 2,315 members representing boards of 45 important national Jewish organizations, only 25% were women. Although this study has yet to be integrated with an analysis of feminist progress on religious issues, surely the difficulty of institutionalizing feminist curriculum projects or of finding funding for major feminist commentaries is related to the absence of women from the halls of power. Moreover, boards of Jewish organizations are themselves being rendered increasingly irrelevant by the wealth of a small number of individuals whose private foundations have the power to set the agenda for their communities. This concentration of power and money in the Jewish community points to the necessity of connecting Jewish issues with larger social problems because it is part of the growing economic inequality in the United States and around the globe.

Jewish feminists have been extraordinarily successful in reshaping the internal landscape of American Jewish religious life. Now it's time to connect issues of religious justice with issues of power and to start working for the redistribution of power and resources within the Jewish community and in the larger society.

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Sh'ma asked several Jewish professionals and lay leaders to comment on how feminism will transform Judaism in the next decade, and to name the questions we should be asking.

Most Jewish feminists are no longer asking "What" or "Why" questions. We know what's wrong and why and we're sick and tired of having to restate and restudy the evidence of patriarchy in the Jewish world. Nowadays we're asking "When" questions because time is running out. If the organized Jewish community really wants to keep smart, talented women in the fold – not just for the sake of their children but for the collective good – then our grievances, large and small, religious and communal, must be addressed. For instance:

1) When will women's issues become top priorities in the community – and get the budgets to prove it?
2) When will an equal number of women be named to every Jewish board, delegation, and conference panel?
3) When will female leaders be honored at testimonial dinners – not lunches – given what such *kavod* symbolizes?
4) When will men show up in large numbers at events that feature a woman speaker? (Do they really think they have nothing to learn from us?)
5) When will men assume more household responsibilities to match women having assumed more wage-earning responsibilities? (memo to Jewish continuity experts: Don't expect us to have more children until the domestic burden is shared.)
6) When will women be allowed to practice Judaism without needing men's permission to fully express our spiritual and religious devotion?
7) When will women's intentions and motivations – in forming *tefillah* groups, davening at the Western Wall, assuming a greater role in ritual – be assumed to be as authentic and honorable as the motivations and intentions of men?
8) When will the masculinization of Jewish organizational life arouse as much alarm in the Jewish media as the feminization of the synagogue?
9) When will the term "Jewish Princess" – embodying both misogyny and anti-Semitism – be considered as offensive as "kike" (the male version of the insult)?
10) When will people stop laughing at "Jewish mother" jokes and let the caricature be retired from the culture for good?

Letty Cottin Pogrebin *is the author of eight books, including* Deborah, Golda, and Me: Being Female and Jewish in America, *and* Getting Over Getting Older.

Despite manifold contributions to date, Jewish feminism has much to still offer – including the capacity to save Orthodoxy. The feminist tensions that emerged in Conservative Judaism a generation ago now simmer within Orthodoxy, but with a major difference. Because the conflict is now located in a seriously halachic community, feminism may finally restore to Orthodoxy the authentic tension between autonomy and heteronomy that some of us believe characterized *halachah* in its most magnificent moments.

Conservative Judaism tried, but it wasn't a halachic community. It was the right methodology on the wrong issues. "Driving to *shul* on Shabbat" does not foster observant stands of enormous moral significance. Now we may see a genuinely halachic community struggle with the *agunah* or with women's legitimate desire to express their souls through communal religious leadership. Now we may witness firsthand what happens when a community asserts that although the entire *halachah* commands us, traditional texts cannot be absolute, impermeable boundaries that exclude the voices of conscience. Our sages waged this battle before, and our Jewish world desperately needs to witness it again. If we are fortunate, it will be said that it was feminism that brought that sacred struggle back to life.

Daniel Gordis' *most recent book is* Becoming a Jewish Parent: How To Explore Spirituality and Tradition with Your Children. *He is now working on a book on the fate of Conservative Judaism.*

We must make our *tzedakah* reflect our values. None of us has funds to give indiscriminately. Therefore, we must ask substantive questions of the organizations and institutions that ask for our money and ensure that their ideals match ours. What questions should we ask? Does this organization reflect my feminist values? Are women represented fairly in terms of management and board positions? Is there a reasonable maternity leave policy? Are opportunities for flex-time or part-time work available? Are women afforded salaries, benefits, and advancements commensurate to men? If an organization doesn't meet our ideals, we should tell

the solicitor of funds why, in principle, we are not giving money.

Just as we use our gender lens to evaluate organizations and decide where to give our *tzedakah*, so must we direct our giving to those projects, organizations, and institutions that strengthen the status of Jewish girls and women, maximize their potential, and afford them equality and dignity.

We become agents for change by using this *tzedakah* both individually and collectively to pursue our dreams and support and strengthen those organizations that encourage and reinforce our vision of a more just world.

***Zelda R. Stern** is a donor-activist involved with organizations and projects that enhance the status of Jewish women.*

When I think about the challenges that lesbian families pose for the Jewish community, I don't think of my own family, which consists of my partner, her teenage children from a previous marriage, and myself. We've been together for 15 years and are comfortably ensconced in a house that's surrounded on at least one side by a picket fence. We're involved in a synagogue we helped to found, which, after some debate, decided to explicitly welcome lesbian and gay Jews.

Rather, I think about my friend Sue, who's single and lives alone in another city. Her family consists of assorted friends and ex-lovers. Sue describes herself as "a lower-middle-class Jewish dyke – your basic lesbian-feminist butch." Sue's lifestyle reveals the fault lines in the liberal Jewish community's acceptance of lesbians and gay men. Because she doesn't "pass" like my partner and I do, Sue reminds affiliated Jews that she's different. By presenting lesbianism in the context of procreation, motherhood normalizes lesbian existence in the Jewish community for better or worse. My partner and I appear to be the same as everyone else, while Sue seems odd, strange, queer, because her sexuality isn't channeled within the confines of the family and because she assumes certain male prerogatives.

Queers, those who love others of the same sex, both sexes, or are transgendered, pose the greatest challenge to traditional gender norms in the Jewish community. If we think that these norms limit the potential of all Jewish women, we'll welcome those whose sexual and gender identities seem strange to us, not in the hope of domesticating their strangeness but with an openness to what we might learn from it. My hope, indeed my prayer, is that Sue will someday find a Jewish community that's every bit as welcoming of her as mine is of me.

***Christie Balka** is co-editor of* Twice Blessed: On Being Lesbian or Gay and Jewish *and is the Executive Director of Bread and Roses Community Fund in Philadelphia.*

Creative liturgy, historiography, new *midrash*, the nascent Jewish renaissance, are all traceable to the social change that brought women to Jewish leadership. Feminism has transformed Judaism and continues, to do so. Jews, most impressively Marcia Falk, are again thinking about liturgy, thinking about what constitutes corporate Israel and how to define God. Among others, Ellen Frankel has reenergized the long dormant strategy of *midrash* with her *Five Books of Miriam*. Ritual too has been invigorated by feminism, from Penina Adelman's *Miriam's Well* and the creation of Rosh Chodesh groups to Debra Orenstein's *Lifecycles*. Much of the creative energy in contemporary Judaism has its source in the enfranchisement of women, whose questions have inspired growth and flexibility in the tradition.

The single area where there has been scant attention and little change is in the area of *halachah* – Jewish law. Until recently, feminists found the language and practice of *halachah* too compromised by patriarchal systems of control and traditionally male systems of collegial (or not so collegial) interaction, to be subject to feminist revision. Today there is a renewed attempt to come to terms with Judaism as a religion that has classically expressed itself through the language and practice of law. Rachel Adler's *Engendering Judaism* points the way for the next generation of work. Just as we could not have predicted adaptations in our prayerbooks, we cannot imagine the impact of *poskot* as they begin to reconsider Jewish law. I imagine a revitalization of the halachic process that has been static for generations. It is a thrilling prospect.

***Leonard Gordon** serves as rabbi at the Germantown Jewish Centre in Philadelphia, PA. He teaches rabbinic civilization at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.*

Feminists in the Orthodox Jewish community confront different questions and challenges than Jewish feminists in the more liberal denominations, and certainly than secular Jewish feminists. We are still oppressed in the name of God — or so we are told. We are still denied full access to sacred rituals, objects, and spaces. Although women's voices are finally being heard in prayer, there are still many communities and rabbis who condemn the practice of women's *tefillah* groups or women gathered in prayer at the *Kotel*. Will Orthodox congregations and rabbis take advantage of the halachic windows of

opportunity that already exist to welcome women's participation in *tefillot*?

Other questions persist: When will Orthodox rabbis use their power to stop men from holding their wives captive, taking advantage of the inequities in Jewish marriage and divorce laws? When will women be ordained as Orthodox rabbis? Some of the more liberal Orthodox shuls have hired women as congregational interns. Is this to placate the desire for female rabbinical role models and leaders, or is this a sincere step in the right direction? As more women are taking on the *mitzvot* of *tallit* and *tefillin*, will this be a passing fad, or will women indeed begin to see this option as an opportunity within the framework of *halachah* to draw closer to God? What other *mitzvot* will Orthodox women adopt to strengthen their identities as members of this sacred covenant?

***Chaviva Ner-David**, author of the memoir,* Life on the Fringes: A Feminist Journey Toward Traditional Rabbinic Ordination, *is a doctoral candidate in Philosophy at Bar Ilan University.*

It is time to change the paradigm by which women, as well as the ideology of feminism, are seen as agents that either maintain or thwart Jewish continuity. As observers of American Jewish life, we must move away from only asking about whether or not divorce, lesbian families, single parenthood, and feminism are "good or bad for the Jews." We should be placing the diverse experiences of women at the center of inquiry.

When questions are asked from a woman's standpoint, new themes emerge in the study of Jewish life. A feminist analysis would turn scholarly attention to gender politics in Jewish families, a topic that is rarely examined. For example, we might ask why women who marry Orthodox men tend to become Orthodox more often than men who marry Orthodox women. Or, why more non-Jewish women convert to Judaism than do non-Jewish men. It would be interesting to explore in a micro-sociological way how couples make these decisions, and through the decisions negotiate power in their relationships.

Research that is motivated by the concern to strengthen American Jewish life is important and interesting. At the same time, though, we must remember to also ask questions about contemporary Jewish women that are divorced from a survivalist agenda.

***Dr. Shelly Tenenbaum**, editor with Lynn Davidman of* Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies, *teaches at Clark University.*

We Jews are a community based on memory. We have sustained ourselves by telling and retelling stories of our ancestors, connecting the threads of their lives to our own in each generation. In so doing, we not only kept the tradition alive, we conferred meaning on our own experience.

What our ancestors chose to pass on, and what they chose to let pass from our collective memory, has had a profound impact on who we are today as Jewish women and men. Recognizing how the partial and distorted record bequeathed to us has limited women's as well as men's understanding and imagination not just of who we have been, but of who we are, and who we might become, we embarked, in the final decades of the 20th century, on the crucial task of transforming Jewish memory.

In the coming decade we must pursue that transformation vigorously. We must focus the same energy, wisdom, and creativity that most recently went into feminist interpretations of Torah, toward the rewriting of Jewish history. If, in the coming decade, we hope to engage women and men as full partners in the shaping of Jewish life in the 21st century, we must open Jewish organizational, communal, and religious life to a conception of a Jewish past in which women as well as men are the measure. Only then will we secure the foundation for the equitable and inclusive Jewish future we have worked for more than a century to build.

***Gail Twersky Reimer** co-edited* Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a *Sacred Story* and *Beginning Anew: A Women's Companion to the High Holy Days*. She is the founding director of The Jewish Women's Archive.

The past 30 years have been an exciting, and at times painful, period of naming the silences imposed on women and their lack of access to halachic authority and Torah study. Great strides have been taken to create a more level field on which both women's and men's images of God are expressed. These accomplishments exist in a tense and loving relationship with *halachah*.

And yet we still live in *dor hamidbar*, the generation of the desert. The transitional generation between the narrow spaces of women's silence and absence, and the land of struggling with a God whose contours, boundaries, and topographies we only dream about. When our daughters grow up in a world where their obligation to study Torah is as obvious as their obligation to keep shabbat, and our sons count their sisters in a *minyan* as thoughtlessly as they count themselves, we will begin to see that a community of equals impacts the way we picture the relationship between God and Israel. Only then will the language of our religious life evolve naturally to metaphorical and lyrical places we can hardly imagine.

There is still work to be done. Those of us who are feminist and committed to living in a halachic community must continue to name the silences of gay and lesbian singles and couples, the inequities of divorce, and the hierarchy of class in our synagogues and communal institutions.

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Dear friends,

The voices in this issue reflect both a groundedness and a sense of being in flux. They elicit new questions and build on several decades, even several waves, of earlier feminist imagination. These voices, and the issues they raise, not only inform our lives as Jews but also shape the ways in which we see the broader world. Our culture — what's visible and also what speaks discreetly from our collective history and consciousness, what gives life to our ordinary tasks and our extraordinary visions — both binds and serves as a springboard for change. Women live as residents of our communities and as strangers, observing a feminist subculture that is both named and anonymous.

The articles in this issue represent the intelligence and passion of many women committed to changing Jewish life. Soliciting these essays was not easy. I found more strife and competition between women, more territorial issues around intellectual ideology than I had anticipated. I would hope that our exterior world reflects in some measure the interior, sacred spaces that we have claimed. I hope that the transformation we anticipate is built upon and indistinguishable from the very cadence of our created lives.

This issue concludes with several "visionary statements" that frame that transformation. Rather than isolated fragments of hope, they are cast as an ensemble articulating the longings and dreams, the plans and designs, of Jewish feminism.

Although Jewish feminism is a global issue – and transcends the boundaries observed in much Jewish communal life – most of its proponents speak as North American women. Men's voices are almost silent, and men are rarely to be seen at forums pertaining to an engendered Judaism. If we are to partner in building a more sustainable, welcoming Judaism, we should be doing so together.

B'vracha,
Susan Berrin
Editor

We extend our deepest appreciation to Barbara Dobkin for her generous support of this special issue of *Sh'ma*. Barbara's generosity of spirit extends beyond organizations like Ma'yan and the Jewish Women's Archive, where she puts enormous energy. Her philanthropy gives life to much of the work, and many of the visions and dreams, articulated within these pages.

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