

Jewish Feminism: “Witnessing a New Phase in the Continuing Process by Which Judaism Adapts Itself to Modernity”

Julia Van Soelen

Writer's comment: For Diane Wolf's course, Sociology of the Jewish Experience, I chose to research the relationship between feminism and Judaism. While Judaism is a patriarchal religion, many Jewish women are feminists. I was motivated by the insightful statements of the Jewish women I interviewed since their views closely paralleled the writings of the Jewish feminist authors I read. Moreover, the women I interviewed had a freshness and authenticity that brought greater relevance to my paper and opened it to a broader audience. I also enjoyed discovering that, contrary to the common assumptions made about Orthodox Judaism, in many ways even this most traditional movement is not only challenged but also changed by feminists working from within. As a result, I came to realize that not all feminists work in the same ways and that feminist values are manifested in all kinds of environments.

– *Julia Van Soelen*

Instructor's comment: Julia took my Sociology course on Jewish American Identities and Communities and wrote wonderful weekly critiques on the readings. This is always an intense seminar in which students get very involved, sometimes very personally. It is a challenge to keep the discussion at an academic and analytical level since some participants want to get very personal and emotional. Julia did not speak a great deal in class discussion but when she did, it was valuable and other students listened. Her paper focused on the question of women's equality in Judaism and in contemporary Jewish practice. Not content to simply read books on the matter, Julia interviewed female rabbis. The result is a superbly written and very sociological paper in which she demonstrates that although women have equality in the Reform and Conservative movements in Judaism in theory, it does not necessarily work out that way in practice. I found the paper to be very impressive and I think that Julia is a true sociologist.

– *Diane L. Wolf, Sociology Department*

When I was nine years old, I wanted to be a rabbi. I was attending a Conservative synagogue, and I went with another girl (a classmate in Hebrew school) to talk to the rabbi about it. This was in 1971, and there were NO women rabbis at that time. He told us that we couldn't be rabbis because we were girls, but we could marry rabbis, and I was incensed and devastated! —Karen Erlichman (Personal communication, Feb. 2004)

Coincidentally, one year after Erlichman's dream was spoiled, the Reform movement ordained its first female rabbi. While Erlichman's experience in the early 1970s shows how much the feminist movement changed the practice of Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist Judaism, issues still remain that the feminist movement, as a whole, have failed to resolve. Specifically, while the feminist movement succeeded in bringing women into the rabbinate, it became distracted by this success, assuming that this victory in the religious sector equated to victory throughout the American Jewish community. Unfortunately, women's equality in Judaism has proven to be more complicated. While some view the ordaining of female rabbis as the ultimate success, others realize that the larger Jewish community's practices and politics relative to gender equality have not changed.

The rise of Jewish feminism combined modernism and traditionalism and represented women's desire for deeper observance rather than a rejection of the religion. Women wanted to participate in the religion as fully as men, they wanted to be held accountable for all of the *mitzvot* (good deeds), and they wanted to have a closer relationship with God and with the religious texts. Feminist Jews did not want to turn away from their religion; rather, they demanded full equality in both Jewish law and worship (Freedman 116).

Largely in response to the secular feminist movement of the 1960s, the Jewish feminist movement began with the formation of the Jewish Feminist Organization and its demand for "nothing else than the full, direct, and equal participation of women at all levels of Jewish life" (Umansky xi). Then, in 1972, the Reform movement ordained the first female rabbi, Sally Priesand, in response to feminist demands. Also in 1972, the Conservative Law Committee voted to count women in a *minyan* (the quorum of 10 necessary for public worship—traditionally 10 adult Jewish males), and it also reiterated its previous decision to grant women *aliyot* (the ritual of being called to bless the Torah). Then, in 1974, the Reconstructionist movement ordained Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, and in

1985 the Conservative movement ordained Amy Eilberg (Elyse Goldstein, *The Women's Torah Commentary* 25-28). Therefore, by the mid-1980s, Jewish feminism had apparently won its major battles in each of the non-Orthodox religious movements. According to Rabbi Eilberg,

The decision to ordain women, the ultimate symbol of women's equality, sends out important messages to the community. For women, it means that it is now possible to reconcile one's identity as Jew and modern woman. . . . [T]his decision communicates to the Jewish community at large that one may maintain both intellectual integrity and connection to one's ancestral community, both allegiance to modern modes of thought and loyalty to traditional religion. In short, we are witnessing a new phase in the continuing process by which Judaism adapts itself to modernity. (16-17)

While Jewish women have achieved success with the ordination of female rabbis, gender inequality continues to exist throughout Jewish life. In the religious world, synagogues' executive boards are most often dominated by men, and the same is frequently the case with the secular Jewish organizations such as charities. While many see Jewish feminism as having made both significant and sufficient change by the late 1990s, Samuel Freedman, in *Jew vs. Jew*, writes that the Feminist Revolution had yet to create true equality for Jewish women. Freedman explains that by the late 1990s, of the 300 female rabbis in Reform Judaism, only three led congregations with more than 1,000 families. In addition, of the 1,400 Conservative rabbis in America, fewer than 100 were women and only 30 headed synagogues (Freedman 122-123). Patriarchy also exists beyond statistics; Rabbi Rachel Cohen (a pseudonym by request) explains that while overall she has been welcomed by both men and women in the Jewish Community, she has experienced the continued presence of patriarchy within Judaism: "I found that some male colleagues were threatened and tried to undermine me professionally. . . . [I have experienced patriarchy], but usually more from the liberal branches than the traditional side. I have found that, in general, the baby boomer men cling most to the patriarchal image of Judaism." In addition, female rabbis consistently make less money than their male counterparts and often have difficulty finding rabbinical positions once they are ordained. Therefore, while the admittance of women into the rabbinate has been achieved, women must continue to struggle for full equality in the religious institutions of the Jewish community.

A clear discrepancy exists between the appearance of equality through women's ordination and the reality within the non-Orthodox movements and within the secular arena of the Jewish community. For example, at the 1993 General Assembly of the Council of Jewish

Federations, a gathering of approximately 3,000 representatives from all major Jewish organizations and communities in North America, no major policy address was given by a woman (Lipstadt 291). A recent report by the United Jewish Communities and the Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community echoes the point that little has changed in recent years. The study, carried out in 2003, sought to understand why women have not reached top executive positions in the largest twenty Jewish communities in North America (Pomerance). The report is clearly an attempt to resolve the remaining inequality within Jewish organizations; yet, that such a report was necessary shows that Jewish organizations still have a long way to go before achieving full equality for women. Cohen explains that time may be the crucial factor for the full integration of women into leadership positions in the Jewish community: “*Slowly* the institutions are catching up, but some of that is simply because of [the passage of time]. For certain positions you need to be out in the field for a certain amount of years before you qualify for them. In another 10 years there will be more of a critical mass of women who ‘qualify’ for leadership positions.” In other words, while presently women do occupy high positions in the Jewish community, there is not a critical mass of these women to truly make their presence felt and counteract remaining institutional patriarchy.

Generally speaking, Jewish feminists fall into one of the following categories: (1) they reject Judaism because of its history of patriarchy and view the religion as both creating and maintaining patriarchy within the Jewish community and larger society; (2) they wish to see a revolutionary new form of Judaism that is female-centered with new prayers and rituals created for women, religious texts altered to embrace the feminine in God, and liturgy that includes the Jewish matriarchs; or (3) they work within the confines of Orthodoxy and Jewish law, but they use the Jewish legacy of interpretation of religious texts to justify some break from tradition.

Lesli Sacks, former President of Coastside Jewish Community which is located in the San Francisco Bay Area, provided an example of the first model: “In the 60s and 70s, when I was declaring myself a ‘radical feminist’, I also declared myself not affiliated with Judaism. I felt that Judaism, along with other organized religions, was male dominated, and the texts and liturgy were of no interest to me as a feminist or to any women. In fact, I felt them to be very sexist.” Julie Batz, Cantorial Soloist for the Coastside Jewish Community, recounted an experience similar to that of Sacks: “In my late teens, I found my feminism and my Judaism to be in conflict, and I left Jewish life for many years. I became involved in earth-based, women-centered spirituality. Looking back, I can see that

these experiences—claiming my own spiritual life and creating rituals that were meaningful to me—were profoundly important in my future development as a spiritual leader.” Batz now embraces Judaism, perhaps because of the more recent inclusion of a female presence in the religion: “I create and lead both traditional and new rituals for individual women and communities of women,” and she has also co-founded an organization called The Ritualist that documents and disseminates independent Jewish life-cycle rituals or those held outside of a synagogue setting. Batz provides an excellent example of a Jewish feminist who uses new female-centered rituals to create a deeper connection to Judaism.

Rhoda Bernstein, who serves on the national board for the Jewish organization Hadassah (the largest volunteer organization and the largest women’s organization in America) explains that her own experience within the Conservative synagogue she attends has always provided her with equal opportunity to participate and that she has never separated herself from her Jewish framework: “I sincerely believe that Judaism makes a strong case for women and the power of the female voice. While this is sometimes not articulated in more Orthodox circles, and certainly not in Israel, in my community and in my life I feel my feminist side has adequate outlets through the religion.” Bernstein goes on to explain that both in the religious and secular spheres of the Jewish communities she is involved with, she has felt “that my voice is a respected one, not looked upon by gender, but more as a voice of knowledge and extreme commitment and dedication.” Similarly, Karen Erlichman, a Jewish feminist and a Marriage, Family, Child Counselor at Jewish Family Child Services in San Francisco, states that her “values and beliefs as a feminist [are] completely in harmony with being Jewish.” Specifically, she cites her commitment to *tikkun olam*, or the obligation to heal the world, the importance of community building as a tool for social change, and the relationship between Jewish oral history and the feminist practice of “speak-outs.” Erlichman also says that her feminist framework guided her toward Judaism and that she experiences feminism and Judaism as “completely integrated.”

Since the practice of Judaism is subject to social construction, Jewish feminists realize that reforming God-language is one of the many necessary steps toward creating a wholly equal future for Jewish women. Feminists argue that “until a more inclusive, less male-focused vocabulary becomes part of society’s everyday experience, gender equity [will] be impossible; for Jewish feminists, language has been a major focus for reform as they struggle to include female imagery in exchange for the previous sexist and male-dominated language in Jewish liturgy” (Silberstein Swartz and Wolfe 188). Jewish tradition has long viewed God

as a combination of masculine and feminine. The Hebrew word for the female presence in God is *Shekinah*, or “she who dwells within” (Gottlieb 6). Despite the concept of the feminine in God, frequent use of masculine God-language occurs in Jewish liturgy. Male God-imagery is expressed in the text through both male characteristics and male pronouns. For example, God is referred to as “Lord,” “King,” “Father,” or “He.” Therefore, gender-neutral images of God and even a female presence often appear within the liturgy, however they are overpowered by the dominant image of a masculine God. Specifically, “attributes and actions that are themselves gender-neutral are read through the filter of male language, so that the God who performs these actions is still imagined in male terms” (Elyse Goldstein, *From Memory to Transformation* 190). In addition, while God-language reflects the tradition of patriarchy within Judaism, it also continues to act on the present, and it creates future images of God in a male-oriented manner.

While reforming the language used within Jewish texts may be necessary for individual Jewish women’s spirituality and the large-scale success of women’s equality within Judaism, many feminist women have individually worked beyond male centered language to realize their own spiritually. Sacks explained that, although religious texts were written by men in the masculine gender, she has gone beyond this superficial problem:

That [the texts use the masculine gender] has become irrelevant to me. In the Hebrew, it is the feeling of the words, of the language, and of the mystical quality of the language with which I resonate. I prefer to pray in the original text, rather than the progressive rearrangement of the language to turn the ‘he’s’ into ‘she’s.’

... I had to look beyond the superficial things that were keeping me from the deeper spiritual meaning of Torah; if being a feminist means being the best and strongest woman I can be, with no barriers and glass ceilings holding me back, then I must also not let words and surface impressions keep me from getting what I need to grow and deepen my soul and my life.

Erlichman also expresses a similar view: “My experience of God transcends any human notions of gender; I feel God is both and neither male and female, and that the presence of the Divine incorporates all of those attributes we associate with gender.”

Judith S. Antonelli, author of *In the Image of God: A Feminist Commentary on the Torah*, explains that her basic thesis is that the Torah is not the cause of misogyny, sexism, or male supremacy and that we, in the modern world, “must look at the Torah in the context on which it was given—the pagan world of the ancient Near East. By doing so, it becomes

very clear that, far from *oppressing* women, the Torah actually *improved* the status of women as it existed in the surrounding societies. If this was the Torah's mandate in ancient times, how much more so should it continue to be in modern times!" (xxi). Aviva Cantor, in *Jewish Women, Jewish Men*, also explains that the Torah must be read with an understanding of historical context. She writes that the Jewish God had to be male given the need for a rescuer God, and "given female powerlessness in a patriarchal society . . . Jews sought to compensate for their powerlessness by envisioning an all-powerful God onto whom they projected the male role under patriarchy that men most admired: that of wielding power to protect, defend, and rescue the community" (35). While much debate surrounds the language used in Jewish liturgy, it may also be important to retain some aspect of male imagery to be true to the history of patriarchy within the religion. However, conflict and dialogue should continue since it is innately Jewish to interpret, broaden and deepen one's understanding and embrace a version of Judaism that is both true to tradition and applicable to the present. It is precisely this balance that most feminists struggle to achieve when deviating from tradition.

In *The Women's Torah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions*, Rabbi Eilberg explains that since women have achieved equality within the more liberal movements of Judaism,

We are free to explore our special nature as women. No longer afraid that our womanhood will be used against us, we can rediscover some of women's particular gifts, and rejoice in them. Most importantly, we can begin to show our communities how valuable our contributions can be, if only we allow ourselves to function as women, if we do not force ourselves to imitate stereotypically male styles and standards in the quest for legitimacy. (18)

This perspective implies two typical models for female rabbis: one model being a woman rabbi who wishes simply to be a rabbi, "just like any man"; the second model is of a woman rabbi who wishes to bring her feminine aspects into the religion. Despite the way that female rabbis may wish to be perceived, the Jewish community continues to focus on women in the rabbinate. According to Rabbi Elyse Goldstein in *The Women's Torah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions*,

whether or not we are actually different from our male counterparts, I believe that most of the women in the rabbinate today would agree that we are perceived differently. Put simply, people experience female rabbis differently than they experience male ones. And they experience Judaism, the gender issues of the prayer book, and the whole question of

the male imagery of God differently with a woman rabbi. (31)

During the early feminist movement, most of the struggle for equality in Judaism occurred within the Conservative movement because the Conservative movement looked to the Orthodox movement for its validation and it did not lightly stray from tradition, while the Reform movement similarly looked to the Conservative movement for its validation and pressured the Conservative movement to meet modern demands. Therefore, "the Conservative movement, as the center of the Jewish religious spectrum, provided the arena for the clash of modernism and heritage" (Freedman 120), while the Reform movement apparently embraced the feminist cause and the Orthodox movement largely rejected or ignored it.

While the Orthodox movement is unlikely to accept the ordination of women into the rabbinate, it has addressed some of the demands of its own women. Although not always recognized, Orthodox Judaism does have a growing number of feminists. Specifically, the International Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy in New York, which began in 1997 with more than 1,200 attendees, continues to attract large numbers of participants each year (Laurie Goldstein, 1998).

In 1998, a modern Orthodox synagogue in New York, Lincoln Square Synagogue, hired a woman as a "congregational intern," a pseudo-rabbinic position created specifically for women by the congregation's rabbi, to offer services such as counseling and classes to the congregation. Soon after the first intern position was announced, another modern Orthodox synagogue also hired a woman as intern. These two women were the first Orthodox women in the nation to hold such jobs. Surprisingly, the women received the same salaries as the male interns of the same congregations. Despite this revolutionary move toward gender equality within Orthodoxy, both the synagogues that hired the women insisted that the women were not being trained to become rabbis, leaving the Orthodox community, as well as the Jewish community as a whole, wondering *what* these women were interning to become. (Laurie Goldstein, "Unusual"). Goldstein writes, "No Orthodox synagogue has ever said it would accept a woman in the pulpit, and no Orthodox seminary has said it would recognize the women's ordination" ("Ordained"). However, the barriers to women's ordination are largely in Orthodox culture, and not within *Halacha*, or Jewish law (Laurie Goldstein, "Ordained").

Within Orthodox Judaism are growing numbers of women's prayer groups, called *Tefilla*, women lawyers in religious courts, women officers on synagogue boards and young women studying in *yeshivot* (live-in schools of higher education) in Israel (Laurie Goldstein, "Unusual"). It is

also becoming more common for girls to have baby-naming ceremonies and *bat-mitzvahs* (Grossman | 3). Although full inclusion of women is beginning to take place in modern Orthodox synagogues, it remains largely non-existent for ultra-Orthodox groups.

For many Orthodox Jewish women, the Jewish feminist movement is as much about maintaining Orthodoxy as it is about feminism. According to Grossman, “To be a Jewish feminist is to struggle against a patriarchal system with no imposed limits. But to be an orthodox Jewish feminist is to struggle against that same system yet at the same time adhere to an ideology based on a belief in the divinity of both oral and written Torah—a body of teachings and laws not open to compromise but, significantly, always open to scholarly interpretation” (| 8). As Blu Greenberg, a woman deeply involved with the Orthodox feminist movement adds, “The orthodox woman is not looking to put herself outside her community. . . . She wants to integrate new values into the rich texture of her orthodox way of life. It is not a battle with orthodoxy but a contribution to it” (quoted in Grossman | 9). While *Halacha* states that women cannot be witnesses, there is no halachist dictum that states that women cannot be ordained as rabbis. Rather, women studying to become rabbis are simply doing something that orthodox women traditionally have not done (Grossman | 13). In a similar explanation of *Halacha*, Deborah E. Lipstadt explains that the barriers to women’s ordination are traditional and not halachic. She writes that there are more halachic barriers to women being counted in *minyans* (because women are not required to pray in Orthodox Judaism) and to women serving as witnesses. However, rabbis are essentially teachers and there is nothing that rabbis must do that a woman is prohibited from doing under religious law (Lipstadt 294).

Many Jewish feminists want to be able to have it all. While this once meant—to the secular feminist—a right to have both a family and a career, for the Jewish feminist it means adding spirituality to the picture. Therefore, Jewish feminists are integrating their desire for spiritual fulfillment with the struggle for equality (Grossman | 19). The demands of Jewish feminists, while often shocking to the more traditional Jewish community, are leading the way in the evolution of Judaism in its search for relevance in a modern context. It is precisely Judaism’s long tradition of interpretation and commentary on the religious texts and the fact that it is a religion that encourages questions that feminists have been able to search for their own answers, to seek new insights, and to bring the texts and the religious institution to a place of contemporary relevance. While the Jewish feminist movement is sometimes met with hostility, most Jewish feminists realize that they are acting in a uniquely Jewish way, as

can be seen in Batz's explanation for her activism: "Like many members of the women's community who were Jewish, I was inspired to become an activist because of my groundings in Jewish values. To me, being a Jew meant fighting for the underdog, for equality, [for] protecting minority rights and personal freedoms."

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