

RELIGIOUS FEMINISM IN ISRAEL: A REVOLUTION IN PROCESS

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For the last few years my research has focused on the ways in which a small, yet growing, number of modern Orthodox women living primarily in Israel have endeavored to challenge, resist, or adapt the Orthodox wedding ritual and, in so doing, transform it so that it would serve as an expression of their own identity, values, and ideals. The women whom I interviewed identified themselves not only as Orthodox but also as feminists, or at least as having feminist consciousness and knowledge. Some of these women found themselves confronted with a tension between these two aspects of their identities, as the values embraced by feminism and Orthodoxy are often at odds. Among other things, feminism stands for equality between the genders, while promoting the freedom of spiritual and sexual expression and autonomous self-definition. Orthodoxy, generally speaking, distinguishes between the two genders, viewing them as two essentially different entities with different statuses and degrees of freedom, and, ultimately, bestowing more power and control upon men. Only some of the women I interviewed, however, experienced this tension; others, who espoused both feminism and Orthodoxy, found these two outlooks more easily compatible, since they viewed these two aspects of their identity as mutually enriching. Regardless of the existence or degree of tension, all of the Orthodox feminists in my study devoted conscious thought and effort to reconciling their Orthodoxy with their feminism.

I view this phenomenon of religious women grappling with wedding

ritual as one dimension of a larger trend that I would designate as the “Jewish feminist ritual revolution.” This revolution is itself part of a more far-reaching transformation that has been underway in the modern Orthodox world in Israel for the last three decades, with parallels in modern Orthodox communities in the United States. In Israel, in particular, there are four main areas in which the feminist ritual revolution has had a significant impact: increased Jewish literacy for women, ritual, the female body and sexuality, and religious leadership. I will discuss each of these arenas, focusing mostly on developments in Israel. I will begin with the arena in which there has been the most change and proceed to others in which the process is less advanced and still regarded with considerable suspicion.

Increased Jewish Literacy for Women

The religious literacy locus of power was the first realm into which Jewish feminists in general and Orthodox feminists in particular managed to

enter. Although the roots of this phenomenon can be traced to the beginning of the twentieth century in Krakow

when Sara Shneirer opened the Bais Yacov school for girls, it has acquired social power and influence mainly in the last three decades, both in the United States and in Israel.

In Israel things began, in my opinion, with the establishment by Professor Alice Shalvi in 1975 of Pelech’s high school for religious girls, the first school in Israel in which girls were taught Talmud as boys are. Many of the leading figures of the Orthodox feminist movement in Israel today are graduates of this institution. Tamar El-Or, on the



Photo courtesy of Irit Koren.

other hand, in her book about this phenomenon, *Next Year I Will Know More*, identifies its beginnings in Israel with the opening of the women's seminary Michlelet Bruria in Jerusalem in 1977. This trend continued with the establishment of many other *batei midrash* (houses of study) for

women such as: Kibbutz Ein Hanatziv, Matan, Nishmat, Pardes and many more. In these *batei midrash* women were allowed to enter a world that until not too long ago was forbidden to them and to participate in it in a way that bridged the gap between the modern and the religious worlds in which they live.

Orthodox feminism thus started with the sense of triumph felt by those who had the same religious Jewish literacy and skills as men, a feeling that gave rise to a social revolution. The first zone in which Orthodox women sought to assert themselves, the realm of education, is the core from which other social changes have emanated. Knowledge was expected to bring social power and indeed has done so. Only now can these women move on to take control of new practices and religious domains.

The Ritual Domain

Transforming the ritual domain is perhaps at the heart of the feminist Orthodox revolution today. One tendency is the creation of rituals aimed at mirroring traditional male rituals, such as the creation of celebrations for baby girls known as *simchat bat* rituals as a parallel to the celebration for the baby male's *brit milah*. Another innovation is the creation of different variations on those traditional rituals that mainly focus on male experiences. Women

are now inserting female experiences, performances, and voices into these traditional rituals. For example, they transfer practices normally associated with males to women participating in the wedding ritual, such as having a woman read the *ketubah*, or having both the bride and the groom circle

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each other under the *huppah*, instead of having only the bride circle the groom.

Finally, we find that in the synagogue, women have taken on more roles that have hitherto been the exclusive domain of men. Examples are found in congregations like Shira Chadasha in Jerusalem, Darchey Noam in New York City and similar groups elsewhere. These congregations identify themselves as both halakic and egalitarian. Women are allowed and encouraged to lead certain parts of the service, chant the Torah, and participate in other roles which were traditionally given to men only, such as being the *gabbai* (manager of synagogue affairs) of the congregation and giving a *dvar torah* (teaching a Jewish text) at the end of the service.

Female Body and Sexuality

The third arena in which changes are emerging has to do with sexuality and the female body. Dealing with these issues is a radical step in modern Orthodox society since it undermines the foundations of gender relations and separation in Jewish tradition. Nevertheless,

women have been voicing questions and criticism in different forums regarding the laws of female modesty, which require them to cover much of their bodies in public, and the act of ritual bathing in connection with menstruation. Many religious scholars and activists,

writing from a critical feminist point of view, have published books and articles describing these traditional attitudes as expressions of a hegemonic and dominant, traditional male discourse. These alternative discourses are not always textual; the

movie titled *Teborah* (Pure), which led to much debate in different forums, tells the story of three Orthodox women who engage in the act of ritual bathing but do not refrain from expressing their criticisms of it.

Another matter of concern to feminists is the code of silence regarding violence and sexual harassment within religious institutions and families. In the past few years there have been several high profile scandals involving prominent Orthodox rabbis and sexual harassment. Extensive coverage of one of these scandals in *Ma'ariv* and *Ha'aretz* led a group of important rabbis to denounce the women who had filed the accusations. Under the leadership of Chana Kehat, the religious feminist forum "Kolech" rose to the defense of these women and voiced its disappointment with the public's reaction to what had happened.

In recent years the Internet has emerged as a site for people to ask rabbis questions concerning sexual interaction between single men and women, including the question of

whether women engaged in such activity should participate in ritual bathing even though they are unmarried. In view of the traditional assumption that only married women have sexual interactions and that the act of ritual bathing after menstruation is a matter of concern to married women only, it is not surprising that such issues were initially channeled into the anonymous setting provided by the Internet. What might perhaps be more surprising is that matters did not stop there. These issues were publicly thrashed out at a large gathering organized by Neemani Torah Veavodah in the Ohel Nehama synagogue in Jerusalem in 2005 and presided over by three rabbis.

Public Leadership

The fourth realm, in which Orthodox feminism is just beginning to make an appearance, is that of religious leadership. A few recent developments may prove to have set the stage for the rabbinical ordination of women. One of the breakthroughs was the legal ruling of 1988 that enabled Leah Shakdiel, a well-known Orthodox feminist activist, to become a member of the religious council of her home town of Yerucham; in 1990 women received permission to function as

religious lawyers (*toanot rabaniyot*) in the religious courts; in the late 1990s, a program opened in Nishmat's beit midrash to train women to become halakic advisors for women who have questions and concerns about the laws of menstruation. I believe that the next front is inevitably going to be the rabbinic ordination of Orthodox women. While one Orthodox woman has already been ordained by an Orthodox rabbi in Jerusalem, the path to full recognition is still strewn with obstacles.

All of these developments have combined to create a sense that Orthodox women are not satisfied with the status quo. The realization that religious knowledge is the primary locus of power in an Orthodox community has propelled women to seek it, and the possession of such knowledge has inspired them to make other changes. Once women mastered religious texts, the religious authorities functioning in the modern Orthodox world could not continue to exclude them from power. Making use of their ability to approach the canonical sacred texts, analyze them, and criticize the tacit assumptions of the tradition and hoary custom, women identified in the sources a variety of voices, some of which

support the acquisition of more power and freedom by women. More and more women feel now that they "own" the texts and thus deserve to play a greater part in the ongoing process of shaping Jewish tradition. Perhaps it is this feeling of ownership that enables and encourages them to persist in their efforts to take control of new domains.

Will these accomplishments strengthen or weaken modern Orthodoxy in the long run? Some will regard them as proof of the wisdom of those who always resisted teaching women Torah out of fear that it would lead to the slippery slope of revolutionary change. Others will believe, as I have learned to, that enabling the hitherto silent half of the Orthodox community to voice its creativity, its intelligence, its engagement, its spirituality, its values, and its unique understanding of Jewish texts can only enrich and strengthen the Jewish world and religion.

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