

Women's Transformations of Public Judaism: Religiosity, Egalitarianism, and the Symbolic Power of Changing Gender Roles

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For more than three decades, activists in the United States and Israel, as well as in some small diaspora Jewish communities, have worked toward making the Jewish religion more egalitarian, with the goal of enabling women to play central roles in public Judaism. Although egalitarianism might seem inimical to the fundamental hierarchical nature of halakhic Judaism, the focus of Jewish feminists in the United States (and, to a much lesser extent, in Israel and elsewhere) has been persistently religious since shortly after the beginnings of second wave feminism in the early 1960s.¹ This essay explores women's transformations of public Judaism, concentrating on communal rituals and life-cycle ceremonies, synagogue life, and diverse educational settings, which are arguably the loci most meaningful to westernized, religiously affiliated Jews.

This essay begins with a consideration of the peculiarly religious nature of the American ethos and the impact of that religiosity on American Judaism—especially on Jewish feminism in the United States. I suggest that westernized Jewish feminists have coalesced, or merged, these two seemingly disparate value systems.² I then discuss the tension between halakhic Judaism and egalitarianism. I document changes in public ceremonies and rituals around women's life-cycle events, and Jewish education for girls and women, analyzing the reasons that a very broad spectrum of women find Jewish public rituals and education to be meaningful and important in their lives. This essay suggests that resistance to such changes, while articulated in the language of halakhic opposition, is actually, on a psychosocial level, evidence of the symbolic power of gender role transformations. Finally, I conclude that contemporary Judaism is in a postfeminist phase in which profound transformations have already become so mainstreamed as to appear unremarkable. Even the most traditionalist segments of Jewish society are affected by these transformations, if only in reaction.

The premise here is that the underlying issues concerning women's new "ownership" of public Judaism are sociological in nature, and as such are usefully approached through a discussion of the symbolic nature of gender as a social construction. Although the discussion will sometimes necessarily describe particular halakhic

issues, the frame of reference is not what is sometimes called halakhic “authenticity,” but rather the psychosocial meaning of particular developments in contemporary Jewish societies.

Religion as a Public Virtue in the United States

Avowedly secular Jewish feminists—perhaps the most common variety of Jewish feminist in Western Europe, Latin America and, to some extent, in Israel—seldom set their sights on Judaism, since religion in general is simply not interesting to many of them. In contrast, the great majority of American Jewish feminists do *not* describe themselves as secular Jews, and an exploration of the transformation of public Judaism that these women have effected is best understood in the dual contexts of the religious bias of American culture and the westernized nature of most American Judaism. An abiding attachment to Judaism and an attachment to feminism are juxtaposed in the lives of these individuals and the ethnic/religious groups with which they associate. This religious orientation, as will shortly be discussed, goes back almost to the beginning of their feminist involvement.

Recent Gallup polls on trends in U.S. religious beliefs show that Americans are more religious than the populations of many other western countries. According to a 1995 poll, for example, 96 percent of Americans say they believe in God, compared with 61 percent in Britain and 70 percent in Canada. Even younger Americans express this national religiosity. Ninety-five percent of American teenagers say they believe in God, and teenagers in all American religious groups are more likely to attend church or synagogue than are their parents.³

Partially as a result of this widespread cultural bias toward religiosity, public Judaism is very important to many American Jews. Not only does participating in public Judaism bolster their sense of connection to Jewishness, it also increases their positive sense of themselves as Americans. America has historically been more favorably inclined to citizens who are religiously affiliated than to those who publicly declare themselves to be atheistic or secular. Wade Clark Roof comments on baby boomers and other Americans that “almost ninety percent of Americans claim an institutionally based religious identity,” and the religious communities with which Americans identify “serve as an important basis of social belonging.” He further asserts that diverse religious movements provide the broader American culture with

an ascetic morality deeply rooted in biblical tradition and Reformation theology emphasizing duty to family, church and work. Reaffirmed are the twin ordering principles so embedded with this legacy, love of God and love of neighbor, that have long shaped religious and even secular notions of purpose in life, goodness, responsibility and justice.⁴

Moreover, as American Jewish communities are increasingly composed of third-, fourth-, and fifth-generation American Jews, sheer ethnic tribalism has lost its salience as a primary defining characteristic of Jewishness, and personal religious experience has become commensurately more important in the construction of American Jewish identity. A growing American interest in spiritualism during the very decades in which

the American immigrant experience receded into history has no doubt reinforced the importance of religion as a component of Jewish identity.

Striking examples of the weak grip of true secularism on the American Jewish community were displayed at an international conference on secular humanistic Judaism that was held at the Cooper Union in New York City in September 2000. Only about 300 participants attended, despite heavy subsidization. Speakers such as Israeli liberal politician Yossi Sarid and other leaders, intellectuals, and educators from outside the United States articulated a passionate secularism that was fueled by their struggles against perceived oppressive Orthodox establishments. Similarly, for the American participants (most of whom were at the upper reaches of middle age and beyond), vestigial anger against the rigidly traditional families and societies of their childhoods comprised a salient component of their fervent devotion to secularism. However, for younger American participants, such as screenwriter and film-maker Lawrence Kasdan, secularism was seldom a principled nontheism or estrangement from organized Judaism, but rather a casual default mode produced by the thinness of their Jewish educational levels and an unimpressive level of Jewish cultural literacy.

Many Jews who live in Israel, Latin America, and Western Europe describe themselves as “secular Jews.” Some of them believe in the concept of secular Judaism—that is, a Judaism that participates fully in nonreligious aspects of Jewish history and culture, while rejecting the concept of God. Other secular Jews are simply estranged from organized religion. Some are also distant from Jewish social groups and live their lives as citizens of the world.

But for most American Jews, religion is a significant—if often vague and amorphous—part of their ethnic Jewish identity. In his essay in this volume, Steven M. Cohen describes this paradox as “religious stability and ethnic decline,” noting that whereas the American Jews he studied “affirmed their commitment to the religious conception of being Jewish,” daily or weekly religious rituals were important only to a minority of them:

Most respondents reported that they feel competent praying in synagogue (62 percent), regard themselves as spiritual (63 percent), and find religious services interesting (62 percent). Half of them look forward to going to services (50 percent) and try to make the Sabbath a special day (47 percent). . . . In terms of their concept of a “good Jew,” respondents ranked two relevant items rather high: giving one’s children a Jewish education, and attending services on the High Holidays. Far less important to their conception of a good Jew were celebrating the Sabbath, studying Jewish texts, and having a kosher home.⁵

American Jewish “religiosity” diverges not only from secular Jewishness in other countries but also from the all-encompassing Jewish identity of historical Jewish communities. For the vast majority of westernized Jews, the composition of Jewish religiosity departs dramatically from the “total immersion” of European Jewish communities up until the last two centuries. European Jewish communities—governed by rabbinic authority—blended ethnic, cultural, and religious particularity in a daily and densely interwoven fabric of ritual, liturgical, linguistic, and social behaviors that defined halakhic Jewish praxis. First West and then East European Ashkenazic communities pursued different paths away from a Jewish “separate and unique identity”

as they confronted emancipation and modernity. As Israel Bartal cogently summarizes: by the last decades of the 19th century, as a result of dialogue with diverse modern secular ideologies, Jews in both Western and Eastern Europe had entered into new phases of Judaic development. Non-Orthodox East European Jews often brought elements of their Judaic background into secular enterprises such as socialism, nationalism, and Zionism, on a continuum that ended, among the most radical *maskilim*, with the “transmutation of religious values into secular symbols and concepts,” including the revisioning of Hebrew as “a national language” with virtually no “religious value.” In contrast, along a continuum reaching from the neo-Orthodox to the reformers, 19th- and 20th-century German Jews placed religious life in a separate compartment and emphasized “civil and cultural assimilation into the German milieu.”⁶ Although most American Jews are descended from East European immigrants, today’s American Jewish life derives much from the German Jewish religious reform rather than the secularization typical of East European milieus.

Although religion is important to American Jews, contemporary modernized western Judaism—with the notable exception of Orthodox and observant Conservative communities and women’s movements within these denominations—place little emphasis on the daily praxis of halakhic Judaism. They are instead organized around weekly and/or cyclical activities in public settings such as Jewish schools, synagogues, and large familial or friendship-based ceremonial social gatherings. Observant Jewish communities incorporate aspects of both of these patterns, retaining most of rabbinic Judaism’s daily practice, albeit often contextualized within and interpreted by a distinctively modern mindset that struggles with contemporary issues and increasingly emphasizes the personal, emotional meanings of religious experience. Indeed, as Yosef Salmon comments, from the turn of the 20th century onward, only the most sequestered haredi Jewish communities can be considered relatively untouched by modernity, a division symbolized by a split among Orthodox leaders’ reaction to Zionism:

At this point [1900], traditional Jewry split into two factions. At the one extreme was the majority, which was opposed to Zionism and thus clearly defined the *haredi* stand (rejection of modernity in both cultural and national senses); at the other was the neo-*haredi* minority, which did not leave the Zionist Organization and by remaining cast its vote for modernity, although it did not give up its ideals of Torah and observance.⁷

The scope of this essay, therefore, ranges from the modern Orthodox through the various shades of *masorati*, or Conservative, to the Reform and Reconstructionist religious communities. In each of these contemporary Jewish denominations, women who consider themselves to be devoted both to Judaism as a sacred culture and to feminist egalitarianism have struggled to reconcile these two frames of reference.

Egalitarianism in Modern Judaism

For the majority of westernized Jews today, egalitarianism is an accepted moral value; for some, it is a sacred or even a religious value. Egalitarianism has deep roots in western life. In some ways, it may seem inimical to traditional religions, and especially to the fundamental hierarchical nature of halakhic attitudes. New research on the rela-

tionship between egalitarianism and religious “awakenings,” however, indicates that a heightened state of moral sensitivity has linked religion and egalitarianism in four separate eras in American life. Robert William Fogel, for instance, argues that “the egalitarian creed . . . is at the core of American political culture” and that “religious and egalitarian enthusiasms have repeatedly tied political history to religion.”⁸ Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that, when working to incorporate egalitarian ideals into Jewish behaviors and environments, Conservative and Orthodox women have often phrased their requests in halakhic terms, with the responses to their requests also being articulated in terms of halakhah. However, the subtext of both the questions and the responses are often centered more around ownership of public Judaism than around narrowly defined halakhic issues. Women’s questions often imply social changes, whereas rabbinical responses reflect both the attitudes of a particular adjudicator and his interpretive community’s attitude toward the implications of these social changes.

In the hierarchical East European communities immediately preceding the incursions of modernity, boundaries around the personal lives of women as a group were closely related to their lack of ownership in decision-making, participatory, and leadership roles in public Jewish life. The other side of this coin was that femaleness as a gender came to *mean* lack of ownership of public Judaism. Stratified only slightly above women were those “men who are like women,” a group defined by their lack of qualities that women also lacked, such as Judaic text learning and liturgical fluency. Thus, the expansion of women’s roles has meant profound transformations in the very structure of Jewish societies.

Like most historical movements, the enterprise of changing gender hierarchies within Judaism did not commence suddenly. One might argue that the ground was prepared for contemporary changes early in the Reform movement, when reformers began to purge congregational life of the distinctions between liturgical roles for men and women, which they perceived as “Orientalism.” Nonetheless, men and women did not sit side by side in synagogues until Isaac Mayer Wise introduced family pews in 1851—almost by accident, as Jonathan D. Sarna explains. American Reform congregations and subsequently most American Conservative synagogues followed suit with regard to mixed pews.⁹ Nevertheless, religious leaders, including some Reform leaders, saw women’s roles as primarily conservative and even domestic, “to embody and sustain the Jewish past.”¹⁰ Women’s roles as religious leaders changed only modestly and gradually, although, as Pamela S. Nadell demonstrates, within each of the modern wings of Judaism there have always been individual women who attempted to change women’s status and take on more comprehensive, public Jewish roles.¹¹

Jewish feminist change first attracted numerous advocates as a widespread grassroots women’s movement after contemporary (second wave) feminism began to gather popular force following the establishment of John F. Kennedy’s Commission on the Status of Women in 1962 and the publication of Betty Friedan’s critique, *The Feminine Mystique*, in 1963. Both contemporary feminism, and specifically Jewish feminism, thrived in a milieu in which egalitarianism gained increased salience in the wake of American civil rights efforts, anti-Vietnam War protests, and feminist transformations of society. As the feminist message spread and entered mainstream bourgeois societies—often articulated by leaders with Jewish names, such as Shulamit

Firestone and Gloria Steinem—a wide variety of organizational subgroups formed, including subgroups of particular ethnic and religious groups who felt that their voices were not being heard in the broader movement. Feminism with a Jewish focus became distinguished from the generalized movement rather early; the exploration of Judaism as a culture and as a religion was encouraged by the protest movements and the youth culture of the 1960s, which advocated “doing your own thing.” This was reinforced by American Jewish feelings of ethnic pride immediately after the Six-Day War of 1967. In a parallel development, American Jewish intellectuals and artists produced extremely influential and Jewishly distinctive works, further increasing ethnic, cultural, and religious self-esteem within the greater American Jewish population.

Ironically, the ranks of Jewishly involved feminists around the world were also increased by antisemitism within the women’s movement. At a series of international conferences it became evident that anti-Zionist and anti-Jewish feeling was strong in certain segments of the women’s movement. Secular American Jewish women who embraced feminism sometimes found “that they were embraced as women but scorned as Jews.”¹² This rejection of their Jewish ethnic, cultural, and religious identity struck at their deepest sense of self and prompted many to seek out meaningful connections to Judaism. Another strain of intellectual antisemitism was articulated in the guise of feminist spirituality that hearkened back to a (nonexistent) benign, matriarchal, and goddess-worshipping age. Even some ethnically Jewish feminists absorbed and promulgated the notion that the patriarchal “ancient Hebrew religion” had caused “the death of the Mother-Goddess.”¹³ However, for other formerly secular Jewish feminists, these charges of deicide served as a catalyst propelling them into a newly intense relationship with their own religion.

Christian feminist thinkers at this time were actively exploring what they saw as the patriarchal flaws of Christianity. But Jewish women found that the terms of this discussion did not easily apply to Jewish history, texts, and religious traditions. It became clear that Jewish women would need to educate themselves about their own religious heritage in order to make Judaism more sympathetic to women. As Conservative activist and prolific author Francine Klagsbrun later articulated the educational agenda:

We run the danger of defining women’s religiosity only in terms of feelings, mysticism, or intuition, of stereotyping women as they were stereotyped for centuries as creatures of emotion and instinct. No. I want women to be learned in law and text, to combine spirituality with intellect, and to walk with confidence in the paths of the Torah.¹⁴

In an American milieu that promoted the reclamation of ethnic and religious “roots,” Jewishly focused feminism emerged among Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative activist women’s groups in the early 1970s. Orthodox feminists began to appear a few years after this: by 1973, for example, Orthodox women’s prayer groups were meeting in St. Louis, Riverdale (N.Y.), Cambridge (Mass.), and elsewhere. In diverse but overlapping ways, feminist activists within the various wings of Judaism began to work for parity. Thus, since the late 1960s, Jewish communities in the United States, and to some extent in Israel, have experienced a transformation in women’s roles in the realms of group study of sacred texts, public worship, and ceremonial life-cycle events.

Women attached to Judaism shared with non-Jewish and secular Jewish women the personal lifestyle changes of the postfeminist era: higher education, vocational opportunities, career advancement, and personal choice. Some women and men, especially in segments of the Orthodox world, were able to compartmentalize societal changes so that the disparity between gender role constructions in their secular and Jewish lives did not cause them cognitive dissonance. However, the vast majority of American Jews who affiliate with the Conservative and Reform branches of Judaism, and a significant group within the modern and centrist Orthodox worlds as well, have increasingly rejected compartmentalization and have striven to bring their secular and Jewish lives into more organic consonance. As a result, changes in the secular world are reflected in public Judaism. For women and men who choose to live in rigorous Orthodox cultures, change takes place slowly. For those with a more liberal interpretive framework, social and religious changes move more quickly, but not without their own struggle and conflict.

A straightforward catalogue of changes vis-à-vis women in public Jewish life includes many areas in which women previously played minor roles: in all but Orthodox synagogues, women share with men participatory and leadership roles in synagogue worship. Women have increasingly become congregational presidents and have taken leadership roles in communal organizations—a transformation that actually provoked far more conflict than did the ordination of women as rabbis in the Reform and Reconstructionist movements. In left-wing Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist synagogues, liturgy is transformed to make it gender-neutral or to refer specifically to women and their experiences. Within all wings of Judaism, new and revitalized rituals are utilized to celebrate women's life-cycle events. And perhaps most significant in terms of social change, communal attitudes trans-denominationally have shifted dramatically to regard as normative an increased level of Jewish education for girls and women.¹⁵

Resistance to Women as Public Jews

Despite these genuine social transformations, activists have often been startled by the extent to which women's demands for greater ownership of public Judaism have aroused sustained animus among some religiously conservative thinkers and leaders, and continue to provoke this reaction among some segments of the Orthodox community in the United States and Israel. The request for greater women's inclusivity is often perceived as threatening the foundations of Jewish tradition and society. In provoking these profound social changes, women-who-change-things have become symbols of all the disruptions of modernity over the past two centuries. If women, too, could claim ownership, gender would not signify the same thing as it did in traditional Jewish societies, and the last gradations in the religiously and culturally based social hierarchy would be rendered permeable. Given that other contemporary challenges seem more threatening vis-à-vis the halakhah than women's search for increased participation in public Judaism, the vehemence of this negative response is seen by many as puzzling.

Observers have suggested a variety of reasons for the intensity of opposition. Some

feminist activists have stressed the issues of power and decision-making that are involved in making women “co-owners” of public Judaism. Noting that, historically, all elite strata in Jewish religious and communal life have been occupied by men, such observers suggest that men are simply loath to relinquish their power. Others, in contrast, take a more psychological standpoint, perceiving a male fear of female sexuality that is magnified in a group setting.

These hypotheses are useful, but I would also argue that women’s issues have attained a psychosocial symbolic meaning among the more traditional (and not only Orthodox) elements within contemporary Judaism. Women’s public ownership of Judaism is a synecdoche for modernity’s erosion of Jewish social boundaries. For example, a special issue of the journal *Conservative Judaism* (1974) explored topics connected to “women and change in Jewish law.” In one article, psychiatrist Mortimer Ostow characterized Jewish feminism as an attempt to obliterate “the visible differences between men and women” and a “possible encouragement of transsexual fantasies.” Ostow warned that the end result of fully empowering women within public Judaism would be to emasculate Jewish men, producing a society in which women would dominate the synagogue but suffer consequent frustration in the bedroom.¹⁶

Arguments over the proposed ordination of female rabbis eventually split the Conservative movement, resulting in the formation of a small, alternative rabbinical seminary and congregational umbrella organization, the Union for Traditional Judaism (originally the Union for Traditional Conservative Judaism), headed by the prominent scholar David Weiss-Halivni, formerly of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Yet in Reform temples, as women have increasingly moved into leadership roles such as temple president, as well as occupying religious leadership roles as rabbis and cantors, men seem to be correspondingly less interested in playing such roles: in recent years, cantorial classes at the Reform Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion have been overwhelmingly female.

Historical Judaism placed individuals within hierarchies of social, familial, and communal group categories. Although recent research by Bernadette Brooten and others have revealed that powerful, wealthy women probably played significant non-religious leadership roles as public Jews in ancient Jewish communities,¹⁷ many rabbinic decisors constricted women’s public roles as the centuries passed. For instance, the rabbinic Judaism of mainstream postmedieval European communities restricted women’s roles by means of halakhic proclamations that expressly prohibited females as a group from functioning as leaders.

One reason given for discouraging women from public leadership roles is the talmudic concept of *kevod hazibur*, the dignity of the [male] community: the presence of prominent women might signify that no men could be found with similar leadership qualifications. Within this social-psychological framework, the prominence of women signals the diminished competence of men. The assumption is that female leaders make men feel ashamed.

A second reason for excluding women from leadership positions in public Jewish spheres was consideration for female modesty. Women who were thrust—or thrust themselves—into the public eye would surely garner inappropriate male attention to their persons. Interestingly, in most Ashkenazic communities this concern about women in public places was primarily in public Jewish settings, not in the market-

place. Thus while women often were occupied in business, they were not found in the *beit midrash*, the study hall for sacred texts, nor were their voices heard in public worship in the synagogue. Indeed, a whole cluster of laws and customs grew up in recent centuries around the curious concept of *kol ishah*, the prohibition against listening to the voice of a woman.

The evolution of the concept of *kol ishah* over the centuries is convoluted. Since the focus of this essay is the symbolic meaning of social transformations and not the halakhah per se, the reader interested in halakhic reasoning is referred to Saul Berman's masterful article tracing the law's unlikely history.¹⁸ Perhaps counterintuitively, greater stringency developed in the rabbinic definition of *kol ishah* as the years passed. Eventually, with a few important exceptions, rabbinic conceptions in early modern and modern times moved toward considering the publicly "exposed" voices of postpubescent women as tantamount to nudity.

Concern about the power of male sexual response, and the loss of control leading to inappropriate sexual behavior, were the animating rabbinic anxieties articulated in discussing each of the separate laws that eventually developed into today's *kol ishah* construct. Within classical rabbinic texts, women are not generally pictured as deliberate temptresses, as they are in some other religious cultures. Rather, in the rabbinic imagination, men have low sexual flashpoints. Male sexuality is viewed as an extremely volatile element: given visual or aural stimulation, and given opportunity, the assumption is that men will pursue inappropriate sexual liaisons. Fascinatingly, the rabbis of the Talmud seemed to include themselves in this observation. Many anecdotes illustrating the strength and involuntary nature of male sexual response feature prominent rabbis trying to outwit their own powerful impulses. One way of dealing with men's capacity for inappropriate sexual activity was simply to prevent interaction between men and women except under the most controlled conditions. One might say that rabbinic law prevented prohibited sexual intercourse by prohibiting social intercourse.

Thus (again speaking from a psychosocial rather than a halakhic standpoint), women were shunted away from ownership of public Judaism to avert the possibility that men might feel ashamed or do something shameful. The side effect of these halakhic prohibitions was the isolation of women from the center of public Jewish life. Much of the effort of women to transform contemporary Judaism has focused on the amelioration of this isolation.

Public Jewish Rituals and the Sacralization of Jewish Women's Lives

The two most sweeping gender changes in contemporary Jewish life involve the sacralization of women's life-cycle events through public Jewish rituals and the dwindling of the gender gap in Jewish learning. I begin with ritualized life-cycle events, which are ubiquitous in American Jewish life today and have far more significance to the people involved than may be realized at first glance.

To fully understand the impetus behind women's appropriation of formerly male rituals, such as the celebration of a bar mitzvah or women's recitation of the kaddish prayer, one must begin with a discussion of the role of public rituals in people's lives.

When an individual performs a public ceremony or ritual to mark a life-cycle change, the psychosocial import of communal presence and response is multivalenced. As data from numerous interviews have demonstrated, the presence of the community at a bat mitzvah ceremony signals to the celebrant: "This event is not only important to you. It is important to the people around you as well. We care about you, and we rejoice with you." Moreover, the recitation of ancient sacred liturgies by the celebrant sends a signal that what she does is not only important to Jews now, but also to her Jewish ancestors; her community exists in time as well as in space. And not least, the invoking of God's name further underscores the importance of the occasion: God, too, notices and cares. The celebrant feels at once connected with friends and family, the Jewish past and future, and whatever notion of divinity she ascribes to.

The enterprise of providing women with sacred Jewish life-cycle events has taken two forms: the adaptation for women of traditional Jewish public rituals, ceremonies, and responsibilities; and the creation of new events to publicly sacralize women's experience. Examples of the former include the bat mitzvah, the ceremony welcoming an infant daughter into the community of Israel (variously known as a *shalom bat*, *simhat bat*, *sefer zaved habat*, or *brit banot*), and recitation of the kaddish mourning prayer by a bereaved female. Totally new rituals include communal rituals to mark the beginning or cessation of a female's menses, and mourning ceremonies for children lost through miscarriage. Not surprisingly, adaptations of traditional Jewish ceremonies have succeeded among a far broader segment of the population than the new creations. Indeed, participating in experimental ceremonies is largely limited to the Jewish renewal movement in its various forms. It is precisely the familiarity, and the sense of owning something that is now and has "always been" Jewish, that makes appropriated traditional rituals so meaningful to contemporary women. Interview data make it very clear that for most girls and women who take part in appropriated life-cycle ceremonies today, the psychological power derives from doing what *Jews* do, rather than from doing what men do.

Although the external forms of some life-cycle events may parallel those in historical Jewish societies, the meaning for Jews in contemporary Jewish societies has often shifted. Thus, in historical Jewish societies, a bar mitzvah (frequently a rather low-key event consisting of a 13-year-old boy being called up to make the blessings on and read from the Torah scroll for the first time) signaled to the celebrant, his family, and his congregation that he was now responsible for all adult commandments, including daily prayer with phylacteries. He "owned" his Judaism publicly because of his condition of individual "commandedness." In contrast, for contemporary westernized Jews whose lives are usually remote from the concept of personal commandments, the bar or bat mitzvah is a rite of passage that enables the celebrant to join the "club" of Jewishness. In interviews, adults will say, "I was bar mitzvahed," meaning "I became a Jew." Only for Orthodox boys and girls—about 10 percent or less of American Jews—do the terms bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah have a connotation of daily religious responsibilities. However, for non-Orthodox Jews, the impression that they have joined the club of Jewish peoplehood can also have deep psychological significance. It is another way of "owning" Jewishness. Conversely, not having had a bar or bat mitzvah often makes those thus deprived feel as though they are not really bona fide Jews. Many describe their not having had a bar or bat mitz-

vah as indicative of being alienated from Judaism, and those who wish to develop closer ties to Jews and Judaism often pursue an adult celebration.

Today, the bat mitzvah celebration is virtually universal in synagogue-affiliated families in American Jewish communities, from Orthodox through Reform, and across the generations. Reconstructionist founder Mordecai Kaplan, who was also closely associated for many years with the Jewish Theological Seminary, is considered the first to have suggested the concept of bat mitzvah,¹⁹ and American Conservative Judaism made popular the actual celebration of this event. At first, few families chose to celebrate the bat mitzvah;²⁰ during the 1950s and 1960s, many Conservative synagogues limited the celebration to the less problematic Friday night services, when the Torah is not read. Reform congregations, for their part, did not take the lead in mainstreaming bat mitzvah ceremonies, since many of them had substituted the concept of confirmation ceremonies at age 16 (at the completion of Sunday school studies). It was not until some time later—when the Reform movement began to reincorporate a number of more traditional rituals into its services—that the bar mitzvah ceremony was revived, and with it, the bat mitzvah. By the late 1980s, however, most Conservative and almost all Reform and Reconstructionist congregations had made bat mitzvah and bar mitzvah ceremonies virtually identical, including within them the calling of girls to the Torah. Today, the vast majority of Jewish females aged 13 to 24 have had bat mitzvah celebrations.

Once nearly unthinkable in Orthodox settings, the celebration of bat mitzvah has become much more common. Orthodox practitioners, it is true, have responded slowly to the pressure to celebrate a girl's religious majority. Some congregations have established a format for celebrating the bat mitzvah either on Sunday morning or at a traditional festive "third meal" (*se'udah shelishit*) on the Sabbath. At these occasions, the girl typically delivers a *devar torah*, a homiletic address marking the seriousness of the occasion. Other congregations leave the mode of celebration up to the discretion of the child and her parents. These celebrations have become commonplace in many Orthodox circles, with families sometimes traveling great distances to attend a bat mitzvah, just as they would for a bar mitzvah. Much feminist commentary on this phenomenon has tended to concentrate on the disparity between the limited Orthodox forms of bat mitzvah, on the one hand, and the egalitarian Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist modes of bat mitzvah, on the other. Orthodoxy, however, has in fact traveled a farther road than other wings of Judaism in breaking away from previously prevailing norms.

The impact of bat mitzvah celebrations is not limited to children. In the United States, "Sisterhood Sabbaths" at suburban temples feature women who have spent months preparing Torah readings in Hebrew, with cantillation. Even elderly women are rediscovering a heritage that for most of their lives they thought was forever closed to them. One woman interviewed by a journalist was the last in her family to have a bat mitzvah, after "my two daughters and two granddaughters celebrated their bat mitzvah." Women in nursing homes, remembering a time when "women were nothing in the religious service," are now "changed from being negative and frightened to being positive." As one woman put it, "I never expected this, but it feels incredibly good."²¹ In what was perhaps the world's largest known bat mitzvah ceremony, with more than 1,000 women in attendance, 122 adult women participated in

a group bat mitzvah on July 15, 1996 at the Hadassah National Convention in Miami Beach.

Adult bat mitzvahs, including group adult bat mitzvahs, have attained much popularity among middle-class American Jews in their mature years. Many older American Jewish women feel that they have “worked” for Jewishness all their lives through communal voluntarism and synagogue sisterhood work. At the same time, many of them have been deeply conscious of what they perceive to be their inadequate Jewish education and subordinate status in public Jewish life. When they go to evening school to study for their adult bat mitzvah, when they learn to chant the blessings and passages from the Torah, when they increase their intellectual understanding of Jewish history and customs, they look forward to the bat mitzvah as a way to mark the fact that they are at last covenanted, bona-fide members of the group. This is surely “invented tradition,” to borrow Eric Hobsbawm’s useful phrase, but participants regard it as Jewishly authentic nonetheless. It fits in with their American identities, and it makes them feel more Jewishly connected at the same time.

Much Jewish feminist attention and effort has focused on providing vehicles for sacralizing other major events in women’s lives. Religious rituals and customs around major life-cycle events make individuals feel that events which are profoundly moving to them on a personal level are also significant to their friends and communities of faith, to God, and to Jewish history. As a result, even women who do not think of themselves as particularly feminist have, over the years, facilitated grassroots acceptance for events such as the shalom bat. Such ceremonies are often built on earlier customs in Sephardic and German Jewish congregations, which also welcomed female infants in a ceremonial service that featured the recitation of Psalms and other liturgical elements. Because the shalom bat is not prescribed by Jewish law as is the *brit milah* male circumcision ceremony, parents, friends, and rabbis often work together to create personalized liturgies. While shalom bat ceremonies often struck Jewish practitioners as “strange” two or three decades ago, they have gradually lost their strangeness and have become accepted, albeit not necessarily de rigueur.

Women’s roles have expanded even under the *hupah* (wedding canopy) in variations of traditional Jewish wedding customs and ceremonies. Sociological changes in this area have profound implications, because the roots of the traditional wedding contract are the husband’s acquiring ownership over his new bride’s sexuality and his assumption of financial responsibility for the support of his wife. For women to take ownership in this area is, to use a talmudic phrase, to “overturn the table.”

Within Conservative and Reform Judaism, the traditional ketubah, or wedding contract, is sometimes adapted so that it is more reciprocal. Some brides and grooms change the English translation only; at some weddings, changes extend to the Aramaic contract and liturgy as well. Double-ring ceremonies, in which both bride and groom make declarations to each other, are common. Passages from the biblical Song of Songs are sometimes recited or sung by women and men as part of the expanded liturgy, this new custom incorporating traditional materials into a nontraditional setting and implementation.

However, for some contemporary Jewish women, the traditional wedding contract seems irredeemably flawed: in terms of its language, it is basically a purchase agreement in which the groom promises the bride financial, social, and emotional security

in exchange for the exclusive rights to her sexual (and by implication, reproductive) capacities.²² Some within the Jewish feminist community dispense with traditional marriage texts altogether and compose their own original ceremonies of union. For Jewish lesbians who attend the weddings of heterosexual friends, traditional ceremonies often seem especially exclusionary, and some have urged wholesale revisions that are more inclusive to alternative lifestyles.

Change is afoot in Orthodox circles as well. A number of Orthodox brides have established a room for themselves and their friends, in which women's song and dance are combined with edifying homilies for the bride. At some weddings the rabbi and groom come to the bride's room several minutes before the ceremony in order to sign a prenuptial agreement that would prevent her ever becoming an *'agunah* (this occurs in cases where the husband disappears or refuses to give his wife a halakhically valid divorce [*get*]). In innovative Orthodox ceremonies today, it is not unheard of for female relatives, friends, or teachers to read the ketubah under the canopy—an honored task most often performed by a rabbi, teacher, or male family member. At some ceremonies, female friends and relatives read the English translation of the *shev'a brakhot*, the seven blessings bestowed upon the wedding couple under the canopy, which comprise the heart of the wedding ceremony. And in a change that is preserved for all time, some Orthodox rabbis now include the names of the bride's and groom's mothers, as well as their fathers, in the ketubah text.

Encouraging the reinterpretation of tradition, Leah Shakdiel, an outspoken Israeli Orthodox feminist, comments on the limitations of the unmediated Jewish wedding ceremony:

Women's maturity is not based on individuation vs. God, Torah and community, but on their transition from father to husband, on their *kiddushin*, i.e., being set aside from all women in the world for a particular man who is going to make them into a *kli* (vessel) by having kosher sex with them. Note the wedding: father negotiates the *ketubah* and is present when it is signed, then accompanies the groom toward the bride, then lingers a moment behind to bless the daughter as he hands her over to her next possessor. . . . This is how it is if we just let *halakhah* and tradition do their job as effective socializers, without active reinterpretation of all this on our part.²³

Communal norms are changing not only in the area of joyous life-cycle celebrations, but also in the area of death-related ceremonies. Indeed, the universality of mortality and loss have made women's roles in bereavement a motif that touches many devoutly Orthodox and self-described nonfeminist women. More and more, women in every wing of Judaism expect to be involved—to speak at a funeral, to give a class at a *shiv'a* home, or to say kaddish for a departed loved one. Once rare, the sight of a woman saying kaddish for a parent has become increasingly familiar. The growing number of women who have taken on these religious responsibilities insist that they are motivated by the same emotions that motivate men: they want to honor both the memory of their parent and Jewish tradition. Women, like men, find that daily recitation of the kaddish in a communal setting provides a powerful opportunity to work through personal grief. Their ability to do so, however, has proceeded at a very uneven pace, so that mourning women appearing in an unfamiliar congregation run the risk of encountering unreceptive responses.

For women struggling with the loss of a loved one, opposition to their saying kaddish is a source of pain and puzzlement. Halakhic issues per se are not particularly difficult to negotiate, as Rochelle Millen has demonstrated.²⁴ Ironically, the kaddish issue has galvanized many traditionalist women to become more feminist in their outlook. Women's kaddish is also one of the primary issues, along with the problem of *'agunot*, that unify Orthodox and non-Orthodox women. By discouraging rather than supporting women who wish to say kaddish, reactionary elements in the Orthodox community have actually enhanced two "undesirable" developments (from their point of view): they have transformed more Orthodox women into feminists, and they have helped to build bridges between women in Orthodoxy and women in other Jewish denominational spheres.

Public Judaism and the Beit Midrash

In traditional Judaism with its scholarly hierarchy, religious education has and continues to occupy a uniquely privileged and important position. Only the most elite of initiates are considered erudite enough to interpret biblical and rabbinic law and to make halakhic decisions. The key to understanding why contemporary Jewish women's scholarship comprises a true revolution depends on our recognition of the extent to which a rigorous education in rabbinic texts conferred not only social power and the ability to make or influence decisions, but also communal status in traditional Jewish societies.

Jewish emphasis on study and articulation as a means of primarily male cultural transmission has deep historical roots. The ubiquitousness of the educational enterprise is expressed in the biblical Shema, adapted since ancient times as the central prayer of Jewish liturgy. In its powerful passages, worshipping Jews are repeatedly exhorted to provide their children with Jewish education: to speak about divine commandments when active or resting, residing at home or walking outside. The prayer presents Jewish education not primarily in an elite or formal classroom situation; rather, ordinary parents are enjoined to be involved in religious matters with passionate intensity, heart and soul, so that these subjects virtually never depart from their lips.

Rabbinical interpretation of these passages focused on the teaching of the talmudic law and defined the responsibility to teach as applying to fathers and sons. Additionally, assuming that many fathers might not feel themselves capable of fulfilling these educational injunctions, rabbinic law permitted delegation: fathers who could not teach their sons themselves were expected to hire appropriate teachers. Nevertheless, the expectation was that much education would also take place in the home and in other settings. Traditional Jewish societies took quite seriously the responsibility to provide Jewish education for boys and to encourage life-long Judaic study for men, and the aura of talmudic learning hovered palpably over communal life. Judaism has been different from many other religious/ethnic identity construction modes because intellectualism defines male excellence. The legal decisions and text-based discussions of Jewish scholars had widespread influence on the normative behaviors of both male and female members of Jewish folk classes.

Most rabbinic commentaries interpreted the Shema passage restrictively as referring to “sons and not daughters.”²⁵ Indeed, some talmudic views discourage fathers from providing rigorous text study to their daughters, suggesting that doing so may bring dishonor both to their daughters and to the texts they study. Girls were most often taught practical religious fundamentals at home by their mothers. Many girls were taught to read in the Jewish vernacular (for example, Yiddish) but not in Hebrew; others were taught to read basic Hebrew liturgy in the prayer book.²⁶ In some families, knowledgeable fathers or mothers provided their daughters with text study opportunities or hired tutors for them, and in a few communities young girls also attended school. In exceptional cases, wives and daughters in elite families received impressive rabbinic text education at home from their fathers, brothers, or husbands—some of these women even made names for themselves as scholars, being cited by name or by relationship in rabbinic literature. But the norm was that female Jews experienced the world of intensive Judaic study vicariously or at one remove.

Girls' and women's increased access to public study followed different but mutually reinforcing paths in the United States and in Israel. In the United States women were among the pioneers of educational initiatives. Rebecca Gratz of Philadelphia, for example, established the American Jewish Sunday School movement in 1838 and employed women as teachers. As Sarna has noted, “by the time Gratz died in 1869, it can be safely estimated that the majority of American Jews who received any formal Jewish education at all learned most of what they knew from female teachers. These teachers, in turn, had to educate themselves in Judaism, which they did with the aid of new textbooks, some of them written by women as well.”²⁷ Among the women who influenced American Jewish culture were the poet Emma Lazarus (1849–1887), the teacher, writer, and lecturer Ray Frank (1861–1948), and the Zionist activist and creator of Hadassah, Henrietta Szold (1860–1945)—along with hundreds of housewives who taught in 20th-century suburban congregational Hebrew schools and Sunday schools. Ironically, young boys in these schools were for many years much more likely to acquire an afternoon-school education than were girls because of the synagogue educational requirements for bar mitzvah. It was not until the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, when parents of pre-bat mitzvah girls became required to send their daughters to afternoon schools in the same proportion as their sons, that the gender gap in Jewish education narrowed.

During the same time period, albeit for different reasons, girls from observant Jewish families began to have access to intensive day-school education. New roles for women in Orthodox Jewish schooling can be traced back to the Bais Yaakov movement begun a century ago by Sarah Schnirer, a pious East European woman, in a daring response to the challenges of secular modernity. Observing that in enlightened, westernized Jewish communities, women who lacked deep knowledge of Judaic texts were more easily drifting away from Jewish lifestyles, Schnirer opened a school in 1917 with 25 girls; the school expanded rapidly and new branches were established. By the 1937–1938 school year, 35,585 girls were enrolled in 248 Bais Yaakov schools in Poland alone.²⁸ Although the original Bais Yaakov movement came to a brutal end during the Second World War, the basic assumptions underlying its formation revolutionized attitudes toward Jewish education for girls. Following the Second World War, there was an exponential increase in the number of American

Jewish day schools, often staffed by teachers who had survived the Holocaust. Within these 12-year day schools, girls and boys began to acquire similar levels of Jewish education long before students in other educational settings such as the afternoon Talmud Torah or Hebrew school. The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey data show that today's Orthodox girls attend Jewish schools for approximately the same number of hours and years as their brothers. As day schools have become more numerous in medium-sized Jewish communities across the United States, a commitment to day-school education has become a normative marker of committed families. The majority of Orthodox families, along with a growing core of committed Conservative and some Reform families, now provide both daughters and sons with day-school education, some of them continuing through the high school years. Perhaps counterintuitively, the gender gap in length and intensity of Jewish education is lower among Orthodox Jewish youth than among any other group, although curricula vary by gender.

This growing cadre of highly educated Jewish women has been enhanced by the creation of women's *yeshivot* in Israel; the expectation among American Jewish day-school administrators is that both male and female graduates will spend a year studying intensively in Israel before they proceed to college. Haredi, or right-wing Orthodox schools (including Lubavitch schools), for example, do not teach talmudic texts to girls.²⁹ But modern Orthodox women now have the opportunity to do serious text study throughout their adult lives in settings as diverse as secular universities with strong Judaic studies programs or independent schools such as Machon Pardes in Jerusalem, or in New York's Drisha and Shalhevet and Boston's Ma'ayan. Some of these schools are for women only, and some are coeducational, but all share a fairly traditional religious orientation. Characteristically, women's learning helps to bridge the differences between the wings of Judaism: Conservative and Reform rabbinical seminaries often encourage rabbinical students to spend time in Israel studying at these institutions.

Some schools are organized along a classical "girls'" model—that is, an instructor (often male) lectures and the female students take notes. Other schools, however, extend to females the traditional yeshiva style of learning in the *hevruta* model, in which two study partners wrestle with a given text on their own terms both before and following lecture sessions. Such peer study develops a base of knowledge and encourages women to move forward into new texts. Until recently, the *hevruta* model for female study was controversial. Detractors thought it immodest and unseemly, as though women who tried to study this way did so only in order to "copy men." Over time, however, the notion that females could also study in *hevruta* has come to seem less startling.

Women's study of Judaic texts is taking place both in a widespread, grassroots form, and on the most elite and esoteric levels. The expanding world of women's scholarship has given rise to a new generation of female notables. Some well-known female scholars of Judaica are professors in secular academic institutions, as will be discussed shortly, and their personal religious affiliations run the gamut from Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform to a purely secular orientation. Other "stars" of women's Torah-learning teach and study outside of regular academic settings. These scholars,

many of them Orthodox Israelis, are having a great impact on the status of learning for women in the diaspora. For decades, one of the few female Torah scholars who was sufficiently well-known to be frequently quoted was the brilliant Nechama Leibowitz, whose insightful, accessible books discussing biblical portions of the week and their commentaries appealed to scholars and novices alike. Today, a group of dynamic Orthodox scholars and educators such as Chana Henkin, director of the Nishmat school for women, Malka Bina, director of the Matan school for women, and Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg, who lectures regularly in a variety of venues, are known both within and without the Orthodox world, traveling frequently to the United States on lecture tours and fund-raising trips for their educational institutions. In part because these scholars have refrained from identifying themselves as feminists, their activities have by and large avoided controversy. Increasingly, Jewish federations and other non-Orthodox Jewish communal institutions have featured these female scholars within their regular lecture series and special events.

The landscape of women and Torah-learning and related women's leadership options has also been dramatically transformed by economic change. Sympathetic women and men have increasingly funded programs that focus on higher Jewish education for women. This funding has helped to make women's Jewish cultural literacy a normative goal among certain groups. Within Orthodox environments, a few rabbis and institutions have created new credentialed positions for scholarly Jewish women. In several New York-area synagogues, young women have been appointed interns who serve the congregational community in pararabbinic capacities. Shlomo Riskin, who left the rabbinate of New York's Lincoln Square Synagogue to found and administer a variety of Jewish educational institutions in Israel, now trains *to'anut*—female pararabbinic lawyers who serve as advocates for women locked in difficult Israeli divorce situations. Perhaps the most revolutionary development in this area has recently taken place in Israel. In the fall of 1999, eight women graduates of a two-year program sponsored by Nishmat were accredited as rabbinical adjudicators (*to'anut halakhah*) who are qualified to answer religious questions posed by other women about matters relating to sexuality, reproduction, and the laws of family purity. While the program was launched quietly and discreetly, Orthodox authorities and laypersons alike recognize the momentous nature of the change it represents. Indeed, it has been argued that some of the most dynamic innovations in the Orthodox world today, including, but not limited to the roles of women, are occurring in Israel rather than in the United States.

In Israel, Jews who consider themselves Orthodox comprise a greater part of the Jewish population (about 20 percent). Even more important, Orthodox institutions impinge on a wide variety of everyday experiences—from the availability of kosher food to (the lack of) public transportation on Sabbath and holidays—and Orthodox institutions are mandated by law to supervise marriage, divorce, inheritance, and burial procedures. This interpermeability of “secular” and “religious” realms provides Israeli men and women with a thicker interface between religion and modernity and generates friction between ideological camps who are forced to share public space together, despite their differences. The variegated interface nurtures and contextualizes a diffusion of new women's roles in Israeli public Judaism, in various ed-

ucational, civic, and public spheres. In the United States, in contrast, women's efforts to expand their roles in public Judaism have largely been defined by the prominence of the congregational sphere in American Judaism.

The presence of female rabbis in Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist Jewish movements has influenced both non-Orthodox and Orthodox Jewish life. In a very real sense, an ordained rabbi "owns" public Judaism. Girls and young women growing up in American female-led congregations are often unaware that women were ever excluded from Jewish leadership roles. The active role played by female rabbis has indirectly put pressure on Orthodox life as well. Even explicitly nonfeminist younger Orthodox women expect to be able to pursue leadership roles within Orthodox scholarly realms, should they so desire. However, in each of the Orthodox career paths noted above, the word "rabbi" is scrupulously avoided, and some interns recoil from the suggestion that there is any link between their activities and those of women rabbis. Like the directors of many Orthodox schools for women in Israel, they seem to feel that they will be far more securely ensconced within mainstream Orthodox life if they eschew overt association with feminism, which is routinely derided among right-wing Orthodox spokespersons as a purely secular and thus dangerous cause.³⁰

The recent increase of women in the more elite, intellectual strata of Jewish learning and scholarship should not be confused with the earlier feminization of the Jewish education field. While it is certainly true that Jewish education—like education in general—has often been regarded as a good profession for women but not for men, this attitude has been characteristic only with regard to early childhood, elementary and, to some extent, high school settings. In Jewish and secular university-level education, men have been until very recently the exclusive "owners" of the intellectual educational enterprise. It is only within the very recent past that women have made their way into both the Jewish and secular ivory towers of higher education.

Women and Secular Judaic Scholarship

Secular Judaic scholarship, beginning with the German Jewish intellectual *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, was for most of its history as exclusively male as the rabbinate. Today, however, Jewish women's scholarship has developed into a full-fledged field in colleges and universities across the United States and Israel. Some research on women takes place in institutions that have dedicated faculty positions to the study of Jewish women. At Brandeis University, for example, the Hadassah International Research Institute on Jewish Women conducts research on Jewish women in diverse countries and historical periods, and graduate degrees in Jewish women's studies—along with a wide variety of undergraduate and graduate courses on Jewish women from the Bible through contemporary times—are taught in the Near Eastern and Judaic studies, American studies, sociology, and women's studies departments. Similarly, graduate degrees in Jewish women's studies can be pursued at the Jewish Theological Seminary. In Israel, courses and programs on Jewish women were developed first in secular environments at Haifa University and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and from 1998, at the Orthodox-sponsored Bar-Ilan University. Academic women are

organized in a women's caucus at the Association for Jewish Studies conference, which enables them to learn about each other's works and to share their experiences in the field. Scholarly research on Jewish women has also been aided by the publication of *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* in two massive volumes, which features 800 biographical and 110 topical entries.³¹ Numerous resource books and bibliographies are continually published in areas related to Jewish women's studies, including a critical sourcebook on Jewish American women writers.³²

Scholars interested in analyzing the connections between gender, religion, social and historical change, and cultural milieu have explored the history of women in Jewish societies from the Bible onward, producing scores of pioneering scholarly works on the gendered nature of the Jewish experience throughout history. Such works, appearing in the field of Bible studies, rabbinics, history, literature, sociology, psychology, and popular culture, have had a significant impact on individual departments, on particular fields, and on Jewish studies as a whole. As thousands of students take courses taught by feminist scholars, the insights of female academics are reaching new generations and are slowly being incorporated into Jewish studies curricula for children and teenagers, as well as adults.³³

Interestingly, contemporary Jewish women's scholarship in the academy often focuses on extraordinary women from the past. For most of Jewish history, women only occasionally held leadership positions within public Jewish life. This may or may not have been a source of frustration to women with leadership capabilities; perhaps the fact that women were seldom leaders in the non-Jewish societies in which Jews made their homes created a situation in which the non-leadership of females seemed to be a universal social norm. The scattered exceptions to this statement demonstrate that capable women existed in every generation, some of them surmounting the norms of the Jewish communities in which they lived.³⁴ The growing awareness concerning Jewish women as individuals and as a group is changing the field of Jewish studies and transforming the understanding of Jewish social history.³⁵ This research makes it difficult for reactionary elements within Jewish communities to be taken seriously when they claim that observant women before the rise of feminism lived in a kind of uncomplicated Jewish paradise.

Recently, Hillel Halkin has accused Jewish studies departments of becoming "feminized." As his article makes clear, feminization to Halkin means not only or even primarily that Judaic scholarship is newly inclusive of women, but that it is profoundly trivialized by intellectual trends such as feminism.³⁶ Ironically, Halkin perpetuates in a secular context the calumny against women's intellectual work begun earlier in religious texts; he might as well have said, paraphrasing one talmudic rabbi, that the study of women leads to *tiflut* (foolishness, or licentiousness). Halkin and others like him set up an intellectual hierarchy in which the explorations of Jewish women's lives in historical Jewish societies and their roles in shaping historical epochs are viewed as somehow diminishing intellectual excellence.

As Halkin notes, the feminist challenge to Jewish studies means more than the presence of women in the academy and study hall. Jewish thinking itself is being challenged by erudite, original Jewish thinkers who are women. Some of these women examine the very bases of historical Jewish thought. From the Reconstructionist/Reform end of the spectrum, Judith Plaskow challenges basic assumptions by asking:

“Who owns Jewish thought?” Viewing egalitarianism as a sacred principle by which all other things are evaluated, Plaskow proposes remaking Judaism as a completely egalitarian civilization, leveling traditional hierarchies of person, place, or time, and reincorporating women-centered spiritual elements that have been rejected by historical Judaism.³⁷

From within the Israeli Orthodox framework, Bar-Ilan philosophy professor Tamar Ross has for several years been speaking and writing about her approach to the divine source of Torah (*torah misinai*), which she bases on the thought of R. Avraham Yitzhak Kook, one of the revered icons of the religious Zionist movement.³⁸ Ross’s theory builds on a rabbinic principle often used to explain incongruities in biblical literature: *diberah torah bilshon benei adam* (“God speaks to humans in human language”).³⁹ Because God speaks in human language, the Torah includes anthropomorphisms that reflect human limitations rather than divine essence. In addition to using human words to communicate to people, Ross believes, God also situates prescriptions in a social context that people can understand. Since social contexts change over the centuries, the Creator is revealed in serial fashion, and thus people must continually readapt their understanding of what God wants. Ross quotes Kook to the effect that no human can ever truly know what God wants, hence all religions are an imperfect attempt to come close to God’s design for human behavior. Although R. Kook depicted Judaism as coming closer than any other religion, even rabbinic Judaism can be seen as an imperfect template requiring periodic correction.

Viewed in this way, changes in the understanding of divine will become sacralized as “a timely gift from God”:

Of course revelation is influenced by history and the evolution of ideas, but history and the evolution of ideas themselves are the tools of revelation. . . . [A]ccording to this view, the revolution in the status of women with which halakhah is now being confronted may be regarded as a new manifestation of Divine providence, or as a gradual unfolding of the Divine being. The newly evolving appreciation of the importance, integrity and value of women’s spirituality and perspectives in our time is not a threat, but a rare religious privilege, the basis for a new revelation.⁴⁰

The Mainstreaming of Women’s Ownership of Public Judaism

Much writing about women’s new roles in public Judaism has focused on possible negative consequences. Across the denominational spectrum, observers voice concerns about “feminization.” Simply explained, the “feminization of Judaism” theory argues that if too many women are active in public Judaism, it will cease to be attractive to Jewish males. The assumption underlying this accusation is that before women became interested in public Judaism, men were irresistibly attracted to Jewish involvement. However, by the middle of the 20th century, the “Jewishness” of many Jewish males had dramatically diminished, being replaced by a “macho,” secularized, Christian, and western model of the modern Jew. The situation of American and Israeli Jews at the beginning of the 21st century is in many ways a realization of the “new Jew” envisioned by 19th-century theorists with diverse philosophies. In both the United States and in Israel, Jews have a modern, western image that vividly con-

tradicts the pariah image of Jews in their persecuted past. Moreover, as Jewish educators in Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Jewish communal settings note, the enthusiasm that Jewish women bring to the arenas of Jewish learning and spiritual expression have served as positive influences for many Jewish men. Indeed, at a conference on gender and adult Jewish education at Brandeis University in March 2000, papers delivered by leaders of the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox American communities demonstrated that women's passion for Judaic text study has revitalized moribund educational programs as well as creating an institutional basis for the establishment and maintenance of new programs.⁴¹

Thus, although it has often been a source of communal anxiety, Jewish women's new co-ownership of public Judaism challenges men to reevaluate—and revalue—concerns and activities in which large numbers of men had lost interest long before women's roles in public Judaism were transformed. Even haredi communities are subtly affected by these trends, being compelled to focus in a new way on women, women's place in public Judaism, and the nature of gender role construction. The proliferation of right-wing literature focusing on women during the past two decades (some of it even written by women) yields suggestive testimony that although haredi societies may well reseal the boundaries between their populace and modernity, in their own way they have been forced to confront modern conceptions of women's roles.

We return, finally, to the conflict between the values of egalitarianism and Jewish traditionalism with which this essay began. To what extent does the coalescence of feminist and Judaic visions of the world, so evident in the work of contemporary feminists, inappropriately attempt to link two opposites? The tension between the two can be seen as the latest in a series of modern intellectual struggles yielding much that is fruitful and creative. Mitchell Cohen recounts that two of the great Zionist thinkers of the Yishuv (prestate Palestine) argued about the preferability of attempting to maintain a pure, or monistic, view of the Jewish world, versus working interwoven strands of historical Judaism together with other intellectual currents to produce a stronger Jewish ethos. According to Cohen, David Ben-Gurion insisted that the monistic approach was actually a misreading of Jewish history. He charged, moreover, that people tend not to be critical of amalgams in general, but only of the amalgams of which they do not approve. Ben-Gurion disagreed with Ze'ev Jabotinsky's view that

"monism" . . . was the converse of *shaatnez*, a mixing of wool and linen forbidden by Jewish tradition as an inappropriate bringing together of opposites; an amalgam of Zionism with social democracy was a political equivalent to this transgression. A national struggle had to be unidirectional and unidevotional, drawn forth, one might say, as a single taut thread.

For almost a decade Ben-Gurion had been responding to such contentions with a simple claim: attacking *shaatnez* in politics was a deception, for no national movement was "pure. . . ." [Ben-Gurion said:] "When you war against our 'shaatnez' you don't war against 'shaatnez' in general, but rather against a specific 'shaatnez' you don't like."⁴²

If the coalescence of egalitarianism and Judaism is a form of intellectual and social *sha'atnez*, sociological data show that these intertwined threads have wrought many positive changes in public Jewish life, despite resistance in some quarters. During the last quarter of the 20th century, the lives of western Jews as individuals,

in family groups, and in communal settings have undergone sweeping changes vis-à-vis gender role construction. However, many of these changes have come to seem so commonplace that their revolutionary status and flavor has been virtually lost.⁴³ The extent and ramifications of these changes are often underestimated. In terms of the sheer percentages of girls and women affected, transformed Jewish educational norms and the creative exploration of Jewish life-cycle celebrations for females have changed the public face of Judaism. Even women who are not directly involved in the more intensive forms of Jewish feminist spirituality have a different relationship with their own religious and ethnic heritage in an environment in which women have increasingly become “public Jews.” For some, egalitarianism is the subject of passionate concern and a basis for ongoing activism. For many more, egalitarian change has become part of the everyday texture of life, and thus does not seem to them to be specifically feminist in resonance.

Despite the camouflage of familiarity, egalitarian expectations continue to produce change across a spectrum of mainstream environments. Both in those areas of life that are unique to Judaism and in those shared with non-Jewish populations, egalitarian values continue to have a powerful impact on Jewish societies. In bringing together values from Jewish and western sources, women committed both to egalitarianism and to Judaism have created a gamut of working models for modern public Judaism. As this discussion has demonstrated, the forms these models take, and societal reactions to them, differ in diverging subgroups of contemporary Jewish communities. Nevertheless, taken together, feminist-inspired changes in the ownership of public Judaism illuminate the intersection of Jewish traditionalism and western ideologies that forms the context for contemporary Jewish life.

Notes

1. See Sylvia Barack Fishman, “Discovering Jewish Feminism,” in idem, *A Breath of Life: Feminism in the American Jewish Community* (New York: 1993), 1–15.

2. For a complete explanation and discussion of the concept of coalescence, see Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Jewish Life in American Culture* (Albany, N.Y.: 2000), esp. 4–13.

3. See George Gallup, Jr. and Michael Lindsay, *Surveying the Religious Landscape: Trends in U.S. Religion* (Harrisburg, Pa.: 1999), 122, 147, 159.

4. Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: 1999), 36.

5. Steven M. Cohen, *Religious Stability and Ethnic Decline: Emerging Patterns of Jewish Identity in the United States* (Jerusalem: 1999), 13. See also his article in this volume, “Religiosity and Ethnicity: Jewish Identity Trends in the United States,” 101–130.

6. See Israel Bartal, “Responses to Modernity: Haskalah, Orthodoxy, and Nationalism in Eastern Europe,” in *Zionism and Religion*, ed. Shmuel Almog, Jehuda Reinharz, and Anita Shapira (Hanover, N.H.: 1998), 13–24. As Bartal notes, western and eastern versions of modern Orthodoxy crystallized in reaction to the very different types of modernization emerging in their respective communities: in Eastern Europe, “Jews maintained social frameworks with a distinctly corporate nature,” whereas “in Germany, Orthodoxy was fundamentally a matter of making the religious element of life fit in with the demands of the state and the spirit of the age, while leaving behind the total immersion that had typified life in the traditional community.”

7. Yosef Salmon, “Zionism and Anti-Zionism in Traditional Judaism in Eastern Europe,” in *ibid.*, 25–43, esp. 32.

8. Robert William Fogel, *The Fourth Great Awakening & the Future of Egalitarianism* (Chicago: 2000), cited in book review by Matthew Miller, *New York Times Book Review Section* (8 Oct. 2000), 37.

9. See Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Debate Over Mixed Seating in the American Synagogue," in *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Hanover, N.H.: 1987), 363–394.

10. Karla Goldman, *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery: Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism* (Cambridge, Mass.: 2000), 171.

11. See Pamela S. Nadell, *Women Who Would Be Rabbis: A History of Women's Ordination, 1889–1985* (Boston: 1998).

12. For a historical view of such issues in the interwar period, see Fishman, *A Breath of Life*, 11.

13. Gerda Lerner in *The Creation of Patriarchy*, as discussed by Amy Newman, "The Idea of Judaism in Feminism and Afrocentrism," in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, ed. David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel (Berkeley: 1998), 150–181, esp. 155.

14. Francine Klagsbrun, *Moment* 17, no. 4 (August 1992), 14, 17.

15. Ironically, equal levels of religious education for boys and girls obtain most consistently in the Orthodox day-school sector, whereas the ostensibly more egalitarian Reform and Conservative afternoon schools continue to show a disparity in years of schooling for boys and girls.

16. Quoted in Fishman, *A Breath of Life*, 208.

17. See Bernadette Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue* (Chico, Calif.: 1982).

18. Saul Berman, "Kol 'Isha," in *Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein Memorial Volume*, ed. Leo Landman (New York: 1980), 45–66, explains the development of this series of prohibitions. The evolution of the *kol islah* concept can be briefly summarized as follows. The talmudic axiom *kol beishah 'ervah* ("the voice of a woman is naked/sexual/licentious") is twice attributed to R. Shmuel. These initial talmudic references are concerned with the *speaking voices* of women, not their singing voices. That is, the sound of women speaking is considered a distraction to men absorbed in sacred tasks: were a man to hear his wife's voice as he recited the pivotal Shema prayer, it might distract him in a manner similar to that of seeing her naked body, and he would lose his devotional intent and intensity (Berakhot 24a). Second, in a completely different discussion, Shmuel is quoted by a colleague who insists that talking or communicating via messages or messengers with married women, even to inquire about another man's wife's well-being, might lead to *billets doux* and illicit sexual liaisons (Kiddushin 70a).

A third, entirely separate discussion about banning singing at feasts comments that when men and women sing together in a festive environment, they create an erotic conflagration (Sotah 48a). This discussion became the basis for prohibiting female instrumentalists or vocalists at such gatherings, but was not linked to the concept of *kol islah* until much later.

The two separate talmudic principles about the dangers of women's speaking voices (a) in prayer, or (b) in conversation, remained unlinked in rabbinic literature for hundreds of years. Some rabbis focused on *which* women's voices should be prohibited, stipulating that the voice of a woman who is sexually unavailable to a man—that is, another man's wife—is the most important application of *kol beisha 'ervah*. It was not until the late medieval period that the contemporary conception of *kol islah* began to jell. By the time of the *rishonim* in Franco-Germany, rabbinic assumptions were usually that *kol islah* refers to women's singing voices, rather than to their speaking voices. Many of these commentators did not consider women's voices to be inherently inappropriate, only situationally inappropriate. Moreover, they articulated the principle that the novelty of exposure makes *kol islah* arousing and problematic, whereas regularity—(*regilut*)—insulates men from erotic feelings in ordinary situations.

19. See Carol Kessler, "Kaplan on Women in Jewish Life," *The Reconstructionist* 13 (July–Aug. 1981), 38–44.

20. See Marshall Sklare, *Conservative Judaism: An American Religious Movement* (New York: 1972), 154–155.

21. Barbara Trainin Blank, "Family Matters: Late Mitzvas," *Hadassah* 77, no. 10 (June/July 1996), 25–27.

22. For a feminist deconstruction of the traditional ketubah, see Laura Levitt's article in Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt, *Judaism Since Gender* (New York: 1997).

23. See Women's Tefillah Network (WTN) (www.shamash.org) 9 Sept. 1999.

24. See Rochelle Millen, "The Female Voice of Kaddish," in *Jewish Legal Writings By Women*, ed. Micah D. Halpern and Chana Safrai (Jerusalem: 1998), 179–201.

25. See Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, "The Impact of Feminism on Rabbinic Studies: The Impossible Paradox of Reading Women into Rabbinic Literature," in *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, vol. 16, *Jews and Gender: The Challenge to Hierarchy*, ed. Jonathan Frankel (New York: 2000), 107–108.

26. See Shoshana Zolty, *And All Your Children Shall Be Learned: Women and the Study of Torah in Jewish Law and History* (Northvale, N.J.: 1993).

27. Jonathan D. Sarna, *A Great Awakening: The Transformation That Shaped Twentieth Century American Judaism and Its Implications for Today* (New York: 1995), 19.

28. See Deborah Weissman, "Education of Jewish Women," *Encyclopaedia Judaica Yearbook* (1986–1987), 33.

29. See, however, Menachem Schneerson, *Mesiḥat shabat parshat Emor, 'erev lag ba'omer 5771: 'al davar ḥiyuv neshei yisrael behinukh limud hatorah*, May 1990. In this article, the late Lubavitcher Rebbe urged that women be taught the Oral Torah so that they could supervise and guide their children's religious studies. Such study sessions are necessary, he said, because without them, women could easily be seduced by the charms of secular studies. Schneerson also asserted that women should study (with their husbands) even the "fine, dialectical" points of law that most previous rabbis had posited as being inappropriate for women. He wrote: "It is human nature for male and female to delight in this kind of study. Through this there will develop in [women] the proper sensitivities and talents in the spirit of our Holy Torah."

30. For an ethnographic study of the transformation of Orthodox Jewish norms, see Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Changing Minds: Feminism in Contemporary Orthodox Life* (New York: 2000).

31. Paula E. Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore (eds.), *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (New York: 1997).

32. See Ann R. Shapiro, Sara R. Horowitz, Ellen Schiff, and Miriyam Glazer (eds.), *Jewish American Women Writers: A Biographical and Critical Sourcebook* (Westport, Conn.: 1994).

33. Those interested in researching this area further should look for publications by Jewish feminist scholars such as Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, Ross Kraemer, Nehama Aschkenasy, Carol Meyers, Susan Niditch, Judith Hauptman, Judith Baskin, Paula Hyman, Marion Kaplan, Hasia Diner, Shulamit Reinharz, Joyce Antler, Sara Horowitz, Rochelle Millen, Norma Baumel Joseph, Chava Weissler, Marcia Falk, Deborah Dash Moore, Ellen Umansky, Judith Plaskow, and Riv-Ellen Prell, to name just a few representative scholars among scores of actively publishing academics. Within each field, the list of feminist scholars is long and diverse—and growing.

34. Natalie Zemon Davis' brilliant study of 17th century women from three religious traditions suggests that unusual women actually used the constrictions of their lives as creative building blocks for extraordinary expression. One of her examples is Glikl bas Judah Leib (Glikl of Hameln), the pious daughter, wife, widowed businesswoman, and mother of 13, whose lively memoirs remain a major historical source of information on 17th-century European Jewish life. See *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1995).

35. Recent research has revealed information about such individuals as the frustrated 19th-century *misnagdik* (nonhasidic) pious intellectual, Reyna Basya Berlin of Volozhyn, the wife of the renowned R. Naphtali Zvi Berlin. See Don Seeman and Rebecca Kobrin, "Like One of the Whole Men: Learning, Gender and Autobiography in R. Barukh Epstein's *Mekor Barukh*," in *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues* 2 (Spring 1999), 52–94.

36. Hillel Halkin, "The Feminization of Jewish Studies," *Commentary* 105, no. 2 (Feb. 1998), 39–45.

37. See Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai* (San Francisco: 1991).

38. Over the past few years, Ross has articulated these ideas at the first and second international conferences on Feminism and Orthodoxy, sponsored by the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA), in New York (February 1997 and 1998) and at sermons and classes in a variety of synagogues and educational institutions, including the Maimonides School in Brookline, Massachusetts in May 1997, and Manhattan's Kehilath Israel in February 1998. See her essay, "Modern Orthodoxy and the Challenge of Feminism," in *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, vol. 16, *Jews and Gender: The Challenge to Hierarchy*, ed. Jonathan Frankel (New York: 2000), 3–38.

39. Anna Urowitz-Freudenstein explains the evolution of this principle:

This hermeneutical principle that is classically attributed to the School of Rabbi Yishmael first appears in the Tannaitic (Halakhic) Midrashim in two places: Sifra Kedosha Parsha 10 and Sifre Numbers Piske 112. It is also found in many places in the Babylonian Talmud. In Tannaitic literature, the phrase is used to explain the phenomenon of two words, or at least two roots repeated consecutively in the Bible. . . . [A]ccording to the principle that the Torah speaks in human language, special significance need not be applied to each occurrence of the two words/roots in question. (*H-Judaic Digest*, 7 Oct. 1999)

40. Tamar Ross and Yehudah Gelman, "Hashlakhot hafeminizm 'al teologiyah yehudit ortodoksit," in *Rav-tarbutiyut himdinah demokratit vihudit: sefer zikaron leAriel Rosen-Zvi z"l*, ed. Menahem Mautner, Avi Sagi, and Ronen Shamir (Tel Aviv: 1998), 463.

41. See, for example, the papers presented by Rabbi Larry Raphael (Reform), sociologist Steven M. Cohen (Conservative), and Erica Brown (Orthodox) at the Hadassah International Research Institute on Jewish Women Conference on Gender and Adult Jewish Education, 12–14 March 2000, Brandeis University.

42. Quoted in Mitchell Cohen, "In Defense of Shaatnez: A Politics for Jews in a Multi-cultural America," in Biale, et al. (eds.), *Insider/Outsider*, 35.

43. Indeed, one of the preeminent ethnographers of American Jewish communities, Samuel Heilman, dismissed Jewish feminism as affecting only "the minority of those American Jews who chose to be actively Jewish." See his *Portrait of American Jews: The Last Half of the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: 1995), 94. In both written and verbal correspondence, Heilman has since amended his views.