

Comparative Reflections On Modern Orthodoxy And Women's Issues

Sylvia Barack Fishman

Abstract: This essay explores the sociological parameters of Modern Orthodox change in response to women's issues, analyzing diverse responses in differing communities and generational groupings. It shows how younger Modern Orthodox women have embraced many feminist achievements, while rejecting overt identification with feminism itself out of a desire to demonstrate their loyalty to rabbinic authorities and traditions. The essay suggests that many Modern Orthodox communities today provide role models for religious vibrancy, which has been enhanced, not damaged, by meeting feminist challenges.

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Changing perspectives on desirable roles for Jewish women provide a dramatic illustration of the social construction of reality. Norms for women differ from one community to the next—and sometimes from one generation to the next as well, with each group asserting that its expectations for women are preferable and more “natural.” For example, young Modern Orthodox women today, especially in the United States and, to a lesser extent in Israel, take it for granted that they enjoy high levels of secular and religious education, and frequently high occupational status as well. Data from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) demonstrate that American Orthodox women ages 25 to 44 have educational and occupational achievements virtually identical to other American Jewish women in their age group. This finding surprised observers who recalled that for many decades levels of Orthodox women's education and occupational status lagged behind those of non-Orthodox Jews.

Moreover, a perhaps even more surprising result of the 1990 NJPS was that Modern Orthodox couples have more spousal parity than other American Jewish couples; that is, younger Modern Orthodox husbands and wives are more likely than other groups to be a “matched set,” with both sexes having roughly the same educational and occupational status. The spousal parity of Modern Orthodox couples is a clear reflection of—and an interesting symbol of—the changed family dynamics of Modern Orthodox households, which have been transformed by economic realities, as well as by social trends

including feminism.

Within Judaism as a religion as well, women's roles have undergone profound changes. Women's life cycle events, long unmarked by Jewish tradition, are now regularly celebrated. For example, variations on the *shalom bat* ceremony welcoming infant girls into the covenant and destiny of the Jewish people have become commonplace in many American Orthodox communities. Even more so, bat mitzvah celebrations marking the religious adulthood of twelve year old girls are ubiquitous, albeit diverse, in most American Orthodox circles. Even Modern Orthodox weddings are often the scene of changing mores, as some brides expand the scope of the *Shabbat kallah*, or invite their friends and female relatives to a *kallah's tisch*, or incorporate women into the bridal service under the *huppah*, reading the *ketubah* or delivering a *devar Torah*.

Most sweepingly, the relationship of Modern Orthodox women to the world of Torah learning in all its forms has been transformed. Orthodox girls typically attend day schools from kindergarden through the twelfth grade, then attend a women's *yeshivah* in Israel for a year before embarking on university studies. Many Modern Orthodox young women continue serious learning during and after their college years. Increasing numbers are being taught by female Torah scholars. In Israel, some of them encounter (or become) *to`anot* or *yo`atsot halakhah*, female experts in halakhic scholarship respectively credentialed to argue on behalf of women seeking an

Orthodox divorce, or to counsel women observing Jewish family law.

For some Modern Orthodox women, expanded women's roles in group worship settings is a burning issue. These women pray and read the Torah together in more than seventy women's *tefillah* groups currently operating, mostly in the United States, but also in Israel, England, Australia and elsewhere. Although the "Women of the Wall" have earned more publicity and perhaps notoriety than other women's *tefillah* groups, and a Queens, New York, group attracted vehement rabbinic opposition several years ago, today most such groups meet quietly and experience less publically-expressed communal disapproval. Many women interested in these issues communicate via the Women's Tefillah Network on the Internet, and/or belong to the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA). Over the past years, JOFA has held several international conferences, each of which has attracted thousands of enthusiastic attendees to its dozens of lectures and study sessions.

These opportunities available to today's young Modern Orthodox women were made possible in part by the energetic and often painful struggles of women in the 1970s and 1980s. Recipients of more extensive formal Jewish education than their mothers' generation, due to their attendance at Jewish day schools and summer camps, Modern Orthodox feminists in the 1970s and 1980s were motivated by a deep and sincere desire to become more actively involved in group prayer and intensive learning. As they fought to effect changes in the Orthodox world, they were also influenced by sociological factors, such as their own high levels of secular educational and occupational achievement, as well as society-wide transformations in American women's roles and status.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Modern Orthodox feminists often explained that their life expectations and religious

goals were different from those of their mothers and grandmothers. Some conservative traditionalists—both male and female—accused these feminists of not having sufficient respect for women who did not share these goals. In a stunning illustration of the popular aphorism, "What goes around comes around," many younger Modern Orthodox women today use similar arguments to explain that they are not galvanized by the same religious concerns as the now middle-aged Modern Orthodox feminists who pioneered change.

Some younger Modern Orthodox women overtly state that they find Orthodox feminist behavior "unfeminine," or that involvement in Orthodox feminist causes will cause them to be socially ostracized. Indeed, many younger women reject the use of the term "feminist" altogether, declaring themselves to possess an altogether different approach to their religious and spiritual roles than "women in their fifties." Ironically, most of these younger women enjoy expectations completely conditioned by feminist changes in Orthodox life. For example, their ongoing study of the Talmud and other rabbinical writings in formal classroom settings represents an activity off-limits for women as a group for most of Jewish history.

As I have continued to do research and to reflect on the impact of feminist concerns on Modern Orthodox Jewish life today,¹ I note that middle-aged Modern Orthodox feminists comprise a type of "sandwich generation." Many Modern Orthodox feminists say that they created the advantageous conditions now enjoyed by a younger generation of Orthodox women, who seem to reject them along with their goals. While many middle-aged Modern Orthodox women saw their mothers as under-educated and passive, some younger Modern Orthodox women today see the Orthodox feminists of the 1970s as too aggressive, not sufficiently respectful toward Torah authority, and consequently obsessed with fighting mis-

¹ For a fuller discussion of the previously mentioned social developments in Orthodox societies, see Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Changing Minds: Feminism in Contemporary Orthodox Life* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2000).

guided battles.

These intergenerational differences reflect both the general American community and the Orthodox community: younger American women often reject the feminism of their mothers as unfeminine and “man-hating,” while they enjoy the benefits of educational and occupational choices and personal options pioneered by middle-aged feminists. Insisting, “I’m not a feminist,” young women become surgeons and trial lawyers, and postpone marriage and childbearing in overwhelming numbers. At the same time, the Orthodox world has generally moved to the right, becoming more conservative in many areas, including public declarations on the status of women in religious environments. Thus, when younger Modern Orthodox women state that they reject Orthodox feminism, they are influenced both by the norms of American and those of Orthodox societies.

In particular, most younger Modern Orthodox women say they are not engaged by women’s *tefillah* groups, and that efforts to create such groups represent a “mistaken” emphasis on the part of Orthodox feminists. Younger Orthodox women often openly identify with the male rabbinic establishment, and accuse the older generation of Orthodox feminists of having an adversarial relationship with that establishment. Their eschewing of women’s *tefillah* groups—typically, attendance at such groups includes sparse numbers of younger women—is presented by some as a demonstration of their loyalty to rabbinic preferences. Instead, younger Modern Orthodox women focus on opportunities for rabbinic and biblical text study, which they believe to be rabbinically endorsed. Many young women are convinced that through learning they will attain a kind of equality with their male co-religionists.

The feelings of isolation experienced by Modern Orthodox feminist pioneers are exacerbated by the fact that the religious sophistication typical of Modern Orthodox women in the North America and Israel is not shared by their sisters in many other countries. Although

a few women’s *tefillah* groups do exist in some European settings and in Australia, most are located in North America and Israel, and have little appeal for Orthodox women in other countries, partially because of the inferior Jewish education for women in those countries. As was typical of most Jewish women historically, in many contemporary European communities, very few women have the liturgical skills to conduct their own religious services. Just as most Jewish women in the past had minimal instruction in the protocols of formal Hebrew prayer, the fact remains that most Jewish women in the world today can only participate as observers at male public prayer.

The remaining great discrepancies in communal norms for women were brought home to me powerfully as I recently experienced the milieu of women’s galleries in major European cities. In an exquisite Parisian synagogue near the Place des Voges, women sat in groups and chatted loudly throughout the service and the Torah reading, comfortable and familiar as they would have been in their own salons. Only when the Torah was held up and carried around the men’s section below did the women’s conversations cease. High in the balcony both younger and older women rose, their faces full of awe, respect and love, and waved their arms toward the Torah, then over their eyes, finally kissing their hands that had saluted the Torah far below.

Similarly, on *Shabbat* in the grand, beautiful, and heavily guarded Orthodox synagogue along the shores of the Tiber in Rome, I observed *bat mitsvah* ceremonies. High up in a balcony, behind a gilded grating, almost alone in the women’s section except for a sprinkling of older women, I was surprised to see half a dozen exquisitely dressed young adolescent girls scattered among the men in the pews below. As the men began the Torah reading, the women’s balcony filled up with women of all ages, including a large number of fashionable matrons, notable for their gleaming black leather pocketbooks and shoes. One lone *bar mitsvah* boy was called to the Torah; he expertly read not only the blessings but also his Torah portion, his resonant young voice ringing out and up

throughout the synagogue. Then the six young women came up to stand before the Torah lectern. One by one their fathers were called to the Torah to read sequential blessings. After they all finished, the elderly senior rabbi faced the girls, in front of the open Torah-ark, spread his hands over their heads, and blessed them.

Standing next to me, curling her fingers through the gilded grating as she peered eagerly down at the scene in front of the ark, a dark-haired young mother beamed and fought back tears. When asked, she explained that her daughter was having her *bat mitsvah*. In this synagogue, she said, girls are invited into the main synagogue twice in their lifetimes, when they are *bat mitsvah*, and the *Shabbat* before they are married, to receive a special blessing from the rabbi.

The expression on the Roman women's faces spoke volumes: gratitude, hope, anxiety and joy—the passionate wishes of a mother watching her daughter launching into years of growing independence. Like the Parisian Jewish women, these young Roman Jewish matrons displayed deep and loving feelings about Judaism and the Torah. However, it was clear that most of these women in European Orthodox synagogues had minimal understanding of the prayer service itself, and did not expect to participate beyond their adoration of the Torah and their prescribed life cycle moments.

My European experience added yet another nuance to my ongoing exploration of the meaning of change and lack of change in the Orthodox synagogue world, as regards the role of women. In Israel, where I have been fortunate enough to be on sabbatical for several months, I have also been surprised by a prevalent apathy toward the synagogue among many (although not all) Israeli Orthodox women. While younger and older Orthodox women are often united by an excitement about and continuing involvement with advanced Torah study, fewer are interested in worship in a group setting. Indeed, even Judaically scholarly Israeli Orthodox women sometimes declare that they would rather pray at home than in a syn-

agogue. With the notable exception of those special environments offering unusual spiritual and/or participatory opportunities (such as Yakar, Congregation Yedidiah, the "Leider" *minyán*, and various Carlebach services), relatively fewer women are found in many Israeli synagogues except for major holidays, *yizkor* memorial services and other special occasions. Unlike Modern Orthodox women in the United States, who usually feel that their presence is important both for themselves and for the congregation as a whole, a surprising number of comparable Israeli women often feel unengaged by the synagogue milieu.

When asked why they show lukewarm interest in participating in public worship, many Modern Orthodox Israeli women say that their feelings reflect the generally less important position of the synagogue in Israeli religious life. Unlike the Diaspora, where synagogues often function as the center of social and religious life, numerous Israeli synagogues and *shtiblach* exist only for the business of conducting prayers, often with little or no socializing among participants. Indeed, some Israeli worshippers show little "brand loyalty," moving easily from one synagogue to another for services during various times of the week. Since the Israeli synagogue does not provide an emotional center for most male worshippers either, and seems to exist primarily as a locale for halakhically mandated public worship, these women explain, their apathy toward synagogue attendance is a natural outcome of the fact that they, unlike their fathers, husbands, and sons, are not halakhically required to participate in group worship.

The whole issue of the place of women in the synagogue brings to the fore what is sometimes perceived as a zero sum game in the relationship between men's and women's roles in Jewish public life. Some observers have accused Jewish feminists of causing men to lose interest in synagogue leadership. In American non-Orthodox congregations that have given women full, egalitarian participation, the percentage of men attending services frequently plummets, leaving primarily female congregants in attendance, except for special occasions. Similarly, non-

Orthodox congregations with women presidents and board members sometimes find that after several terms of female leadership it is difficult to find men willing to play leadership roles. Fears of “feminization,” with female entry and male alienation, continue to be cited in the secular Jewish organizational world, and many federations and other Jewish organizations avoid appointing female executives because they assume that men will no longer covet these roles. Defending themselves from charges that they have alienated men’s affections for synagogue and organizational life (and, by implication, from Judaism as well), Jewish feminists have pointed out that many Jewish men had already lost their appetite for prayer, ritual activities, and communal leadership long before Jewish feminists developed an interest in more intensive participation in public Judaism.

Significantly, developments in liberal Modern Orthodox congregations seem to indicate that in more halakhically observant congregations, female leadership in administrative roles may be tolerated without creating or exacerbating male alienation from these activities. Since men continue to play all lay and professional religious roles in Orthodox congregations (i.e. being eligible for a *minyan*, *sheliah tsibbur*, *aliyyot la-Torah*, etc.), the few administrative, speaking and teaching roles played by women do not seem to threaten male hegemony. Moreover, reports indicate that in the non-Orthodox world, women’s growing interest in Jewish text studies and high level Jewish education have actually sparked male interest in previously moribund educational programs.

Are men now and historically more attracted to religious worship and study activities only if they can enjoy gender exclusivity? The so-called “feminization” of Judaism, which some believe to be illustrated by these phenomena, is a spectre that has frightened some observers of contemporary social and religious change. Judaism is unusual among Western world religions in the extent to which it has historically managed to involve large numbers of men in regular worship, study, and religious practice. Even the most common Jewish man could enjoy the social dignity

and spiritual uplift of “making” a *minyan*, or being called to the Torah for an important life cycle moment. Arguably, this unusual male “egalitarianism” was extremely important in the preservation of Jewish religious culture, and also had a positive transformative effect for its practitioners.

Have Modern Orthodox young women in the United States, like women in Israel and elsewhere, retreated from demands for greater participation in public worship out of some instinctive protectiveness toward traditional Jewish life and its male leaders—not so differently than young American women who call older feminists “man haters”? Are they censoring their religious aspirations out of a belief that this censorship expresses their loyalty to and respect for Jewish tradition? And, if so, will women’s current love affair with learning be followed by a similar retreat, if it becomes apparent that some groups of men seem to be losing interest in their traditional roles as the carriers of liturgical and scholarly activities?

I would like to suggest that encouraging Modern Orthodox women to scale back on their pursuit of expanded participation in Jewish intellectual and spiritual life ignores the sweeping sociological changes that have transformed Modern Orthodox Jewish life. Young Modern Orthodox women will continue to enjoy independence and equal status in the public realm, as they pursue higher education and professional vocations, and exercise personal lifestyle choices. New expectations among Modern Orthodox women and men will not disappear. Wives and husbands will continue to work together to coordinate the demands of family and career. The disparity between women’s secular achievements and the shrinking parameters of their participation within Orthodoxy can hardly have a wholesome effect.

Moreover, Modern Orthodox Jews are demonstrating that men and women can each maintain devotion to sacred activities without demanding gender exclusivity. At present, many Modern Orthodox couples treat their religious lives with a sense of cooperation and mutual respect

that reflects their equal status in secular society. They share more than career concerns, laundry, shopping and child rearing. Both men and women continue learning and regular prayer after marriage. Many have regular study sessions, and some husbands and wives study with each other. Because they are attached to learning itself, genuinely *li-shemah* (for its intrinsic value), rather than as a demonstration of gender superiority or bonding, these Modern Orthodox men and women have shown that they can upgrade women's participation within halakhic boundaries, without "feminizing" or alienating men from those activities.

These Modern Orthodox practitioners provide extremely important leadership and role models for the entire Jewish community. Through their daily lives, they show that gender equality can strengthen the family, if all member of the family are committed to Jewish tradition. Through their commitment to synagogues and schools, they show that institutional activism can transcend Western consumerist attitudes. Through their principled interactions with Jews from other wings of Judaism, they show that religious passion can co-exist with tolerance and *qiruv*. Through their attachment to Israel and world-

wide Jewry, they show that an altruistic sense of Jewish peoplehood can have a deep hold on the modern Jewish psyche. Through their continuing learning activities, and their engagement with secular culture, they show that intellectual vitality can co-exist with rigorous religious praxis.

Modern Orthodox Jews such as these demonstrate that it is possible for women and men to be modern and also to be deeply and vibrantly committed to Jewish law, culture, and life. The role models seen among Modern Orthodox Jews also demonstrate that when activities are sufficiently interesting and compelling, men will continue to be involved even when women enter the arena. Observation of Modern Orthodox communities shows that only when activities do not intrinsically engage men does "feminization" become an issue and gender exclusivity an important component of male involvement. While our social construction of normative roles for men and women in Modern Orthodox communities will continue to evolve, I believe that excluding women (or encouraging women to exclude themselves) is today a bankrupt answer to problems of declining male participation and interest.