American Jewish Feminism

A Study in Conflicts and Compromises

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To the secular feminist or conventional Jew, American feminism and American Judaism present vividly contrasting belief systems. Yet, since 1971, when small groups of young and articulate Jewish women first began to synthesize these two seemingly contradictory ideologies, a number of significant changes in American Jewish life have effected a partial reconciliation between modern feminism and traditional Judaism.

Most of the developments have been documented elsewhere (Lerner, 1977; Fishman, 1973; "A selected bibliography," 1976), but it is worthwhile to highlight some of them here. By way of illustration: a handful of Jewish feminists successfully pressured the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly to revise its interpretation of religious law so that it might mandate greater female participation in communal prayer. Many of the same feminists subsequently won limited acceptance for innovative liturgy and life-cycle rituals they designed to enhance their involvement in Jewish life. Still others, in a variety of contexts ranging from the Young Leadership Cabinet of the United Jewish Appeal to lowly synagogue boards and committees have gained some additional measure of entry into positions of communal power and prestige. Jewish feminists organized consciousness-raising and pressure groups, held national and local conventions, developed a critique of Jewish historical and religious texts, and proposed changes in Jewish pedagogy. These actions, in turn, encouraged many young Jewish women to

AMERICAN BEHAVIORAL SCIENTIST, Vol. 23 No. 4, March April 1980 519-558
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pursue communal professions—such as the rabbinate and cantorial work—monopolized until very recently by Jewish men.

These developments provide a glimpse into the differences between Judaism and feminism, a deep and pervasive conflict, one that touches a number of definable issues. The aim of this article is, first, to elucidate the nature of the inherent but possibly not insuperable conflict between these two belief systems. It then seeks to describe the process by which some of the more thoughtful advocates of American Jewish feminism came to resolve or reduce the tensions between the two contrasting philosophies of life. In particular, it explores a variety of ideological accommodations, the circuitous paths taken by women who adopted them, and the structural dynamics involved in their establishment of voluntary organizations designed to bridge the gap between feminist principles and the conventional Jewish community.

JUDAISM AND FEMINISM: SYSTEMS IN CONFLICT

A useful way of understanding the contradictions between Judaism and feminism is to examine feminists' complaints against contemporary Jewry, and conventional Jewry's reaction to modern feminism. (The following discussion, indeed the entire article, relies upon personal observations, a reading of the Jewish feminist literature, and extensive interviews with leading Jewish feminists, whose verbatim comments will follow. Methods of data collection are discussed in the section immediately following this introductory exposition of the problem.)

To most of its leaders, Jewish feminism signifies a broad application of lessons learned from the women's movement. Following feminist analysis, they conclude that the Jewish religion and Jewish communal structures are dominated by men both historically and in contemporary times. The demand for gender-equal participation is at the core of their complaints about modern Jewry:

> I believe that women should have the opportunity to pursue any and all aspects of Jewish life. . . . In the secular and cultural area, Jewish feminism implies equal opportunity to acquire a Jewish education and positions of communal leadership. Concerning rituals it means two things: equal access to all the resources of the tradition, and encouraging women to develop rituals uniquely attuned to womanhood.

Complaints are voiced both in individual and in systemic terms. On the individual level, Jewish women speak of their feminism as "an attempt by Jewish women to explore our own identities as Jews and as women. We're committed to honesty, and feminism is about being honest in looking at oneself." One woman, speaking in this personally oriented vein notes that Jewish feminism means:

> The redefinition of woman's role so that it can be personally self-actualizing and communally fulfilling. The expansion of women's rights leads to asking questions, debunking myths, and growing to the limits of your ability.

Yet, for some, feminism's indictment of contemporary Judaism is more structural than individual:

> Feminism is an analysis of women in society. The existing system is a patriarchy where men dominate women by setting values and rules, deciding what work is important, and determining sex roles. In some societies, women are slaves. Here, their position differs only in degree. Jewish feminism says this analysis applies to Jewish life.

Whether of a personal or systemic nature, the feminist critique of Judaism can be organized into three areas: the spiritual or religious dimension, the communal sphere, and the area of personal relations.

A quite lucid presentation of the feminist understanding of Jewish religious life is offered by Saul Berman (1973), a modern Orthodox rabbi, Dean of Yeshiva University's Stern College for Women. He takes three types of criticism into account. The first is deprivation of concrete religous symbols that might be identical or comparable to the prayer shawl, phylacteries, skull cap, and other paraphernalia available only to men. A second complaint concerns the lower-class status assigned women in marital and divorce law, in particular, and in other legal matters in general. A third sphere involves the mores of the traditional community that preclude female participation in communal leadership or in sacred intellectual pursuits. The rabbi's generalizations come into sharp focus when juxtaposed against these comments:

> The position of the Jewish woman is to be an enabler. The Jewish home is an open ghetto. Men decide what is important, namely, religious and communal participation, and they allocate it to themselves. Patriarchy programs women not to want to do the things which become the preserve of men. These areas define a man's Jewish role: intellectual, religious, and communal Jewish life. . . . The Talmud says women shouldn't learn. Men are uptight about women intellectuals whom they see as threatening to their manhood. Women are denied decision-making input

> into *halacha* [Jewish law], thus denying them control over their own lives. They are denied spiritual access to God. A lot of *mitzvot* [religious commandments] exempt the women, thus excluding her from the religious community, from prayer, and from communal observance.

The second major area of the feminists' criticism centers on the denial of access for women to positions of power and prestige. They see men dominating the ranks of organizations' executive directors, boards of trustees, and other powerful communal positions. Feminist critics claim that even when women have formal authority, they are in charge only of "enabling" organizations and are effectively barred from policy-making:

> Women are active in two types of organizations: adjuncts of men's organizations and independent women's organizatons which are not really considered important in the overall community. For example, Hadassah and Women's American ORT think they have power, and they don't. By carving out its own bailiwick Hadassah dissociated itself from the American scene. The National Council of Jewish Women plugged itself into the general American scene; they are out of the Jewish community. ORT gives money to the ORT board in Geneva where it is disbursed by a male board. All women's organizations in short, don't deal with the centers of American Jewish power.

The third area of complaint and the one that has received the least attention from Jewish feminists centers on the stereotypical personal relations between Jewish women and men. Secular feminist thinkers have developed extensive critiques of traditional sex-roles; they repudiate norms of male domination in family and friendship relations. Jewish feminism extends this thinking to its own subsociety with a critique of such stereotypical female roles as mother, grandmother, Jewish American princess, and Hadassah volunteer.

Just as contemporary Jewry leaves much to be desired in the eyes of modern feminists, so has feminism been viewed suspiciously by many conventional American Jews. Perhaps the paramount reason for this hostility is feminism's image as an opponent of the family, of population growth and of volunteerism, all of which are heartily endorsed by contemporary Jewish survivalists. Moreover, any ideology imported from the non-Jewish world is bound to be viewed with suspicion by an ethnic community fearful of succumbing to assimilation. As one activist herself points out:

> Feminism comes on as a threat to the family. Jews feel very endangered by the breakdown of their family system. Feminism is seen as another, outside, radical, alien force threatening Jewish survival.

But the contradictions between feminism and Judaism are more than a mere image problem. Feminism and normative Judaism differ substantively on a number of specific issues. In particular, feminism extols self-fulfillment, self-actualization, self-assertion; it calls upon communal institutions to accommodate individual needs. Judaism is communitarian in its approach; ultimate fulfillment devolves upon the historic community rather than upon the individual. As a consequence, Judaism has legislated extensively on sexual practices. Feminism rejects the substance of many of these rules; furthermore, it rejects the legitimacy of any institution or agency that sets sexual norms.

Derivative from the above are conflicts on abortion, child-bearing, and homosexuality. With regard to abortion, the feminist position is quite clear: a woman's body is her own and society has no right to interpose any obstacles between her and her desire to have an abortion. The halacha, according to one authority (Feldman, 1974), has historically ranged widely on this issue and has been consistent only in repudiating the Roman Catholic position that a fetus's life takes precedence over the mother's and the pure feminist stance. Therefore, although rabbis differ on what constitutes sufficient harm, they all require that some significant harm would arise from failure to undergo an abortion.

With regard to child-bearing, the normative Jewish position places a premium on maintaining the group by having large families. The feminist position again defines this area as one of personal choice and, if there is a bias, it tends toward limiting procreation so that women may be free to explore roles other than motherhood.

On the issue of lesbianism or homosexuality, the religious tradition is virtually unequivocal: such sexual behavior is almost always seen as abomination. Feminism, of course, rejects any such prohibition, and, according to some of its thinkers, lesbianism is a politically valid personal statement in light of male attitudes toward women.

Yet despite the wide gulf between normative Judaism and contemporary feminism, a number of women have achieved a synthesis of the two systems strong enough to lay the groundwork for many of the substantive changes in Jewish life noted at the outset of this article, thereby uniting Jewish feminists in small viable voluntary organizations. How were they able to achieve this synthesis? What ideological formulations overcame the contradictions between conventional Jewish and modern feminist thinking? And where did these feminists come from? What types of experience led them to mold two so conflicting systems

of belief? Finally, how were they able to form organizations to pursue the goals implicit in their synthetic philosophy?

METHODS

To answer these questions, I undertook three sorts of data collection. First, I read much of the recent writings by Jewish feminists. Second, having been active in the student and other youth circles which engendered the Jewish feminist movement, I had numerous informal conversations on Jewish feminism with many of the movement's leading figures. Third, and most crucially, I conducted lengthy in-depth interviews with ten dedicated Jewish feminists, whose representativeness can be demonstrated by a brief discussion of their principal organizations and major endeavors.

BACKGROUND OF THE MOVEMENT

Following the 1967 Six Day War, an autonomous Jewish student movement arose on American campuses. The movement consisted of loosely connected and independent Jewish student groups organized around such issues as support for Israel, Soviet Jewry, Jewish studies, and diverse protests against organized Jewry (Novack, 1970; Glanz, 1977; Sleeper and Mintz; Porter and Dreier, 1973). They published newspapers and magazines, ran campus forums and free universities, and engaged in both conventional and unconventional campus politics.

Out of this activity came three institutions of special importance to the Jewish women's movement. One was *Response*, a magazine founded by Columbia College undergraduates in 1966 as a small intellectual journal. Its early issues focused on the Jewish arts, criticism of major Jewish institutions, and new religious thinking.

The second institution of note was the North American Jewish Students Network, the umbrella group for the scattered independent student groups. Its national newspaper, periodic conventions, and its spawning of a closely aligned editorial service for several dozen Jewish student newspapers served to link activist students throughout North America. Network emerged as the principal meeting ground and vehicle of expression for Jewish students involved in countercultural and counterpolitical activities.

Finally, the late 60s saw the beginning of *chavurot*, self-styled communities of prayer, fellowship, and study (see, e.g., Neusner, 1972; Sleeper and Mintz, 1971; Novak, 1974; Kavesh et al., 1974; Reisman, this issue). Most seminal to this movement were the New York Chavurah, thirty to forty individuals who to this day meet in an apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side and Chavurat Shalom, a comparable number of young people whose center is a wood-frame house in Somerville, a Boston suburb. Chavurah members had in common their irreverent views of organized Jewish religion; they innovated new (and eventually egalitarian) forms of prayer, ritual, and liturgy; they were involved as readers and writers for *Response;* and they were activists in the Network coterie.

The Jewish women's movement emerged against this background, beginning in late 1971, when several New York Chavurah women and their friends formed a study group to explore the status of women in Jewish law. Later, they moved to consciousness-raising and protest activities. Thereupon they dubbed themselves *Ezrat Nashim* (a Hebrew pun meaning "help for women" and "zone for women," referring to the section of the traditional synagogues set aside for female worshippers).

In late 1972, the editor of *Response* asked an Ezrat Nashim member to assemble a collection of essays, fiction, poetry, and photographs for a special, enlarged issue of the magazine entitled, *The Jewish Woman: An Anthology*. With the assistance of other Ezrat Nashim members and women closely attached to the Network leadership circles, she edited a 192-page issue of the magazine, which became the bible of the Jewish women's movement.

Many of the same women and others affiliated with Network were, at the same time, prominent in organizing Network's First National Conference of Jewish Women in the spring of 1973, a few months before publication of the *Response* anthology. Network was also responsible for another national convention on Jewish sex-roles held a year later, open to men and women.

Out of the latter conference sprang an organizing committee for the Jewish Feminist Organization, a short-lived national group. The JFO organizers included many women who had been involved in Network activities and a few who had worked on the *Response* anthology.

Following JFO's collapse, some of its New York members tried to pull together a separate New York-based group they called the New

York Jewish Women's Center. The Center too had a short life-span, emerging in 1975 and virtually defunct by 1977.

Last, about half a dozen women, some of whom had been active in Network, the women's conferences, JFO, and in editing the *Response* anthology started meeting in 1975 to publish a Jewish feminist glossy quarterly. Their efforts came to fruition in 1976 with the publication of *Lilith* magazine, which is still going strong.

In addition to these organizations and institutions, numerous individuals, groups, and publications have been credited with intellectual and organizational contributions to the American Jewish feminist movement of the 1970s. Of special note are Jewish women's groups in Boston and Philadelphia. Also noteworthy is the now-defunct *Davka* magazine, a Los Angeles-based counterpart to *Response*, which published two issues on the Jewish woman. Finally, individual women in various locales have been engaged in a number of independent Jewish feminist projects, including theses and term papers, women's courses in the extracurricular Jewish Free Universities, a consultation service for nonsexist weddings and specially designed Bat Mitzvahs.

Thus, although the American Jewish feminist movement has consisted of a number of organizations, publications and spontaneous actions scattered throughout the country, most of the avowedly Jewish feminist institutions have emerged in and around New York City and, as I have tried to show, these New York-based efforts are initimately linked to each other. As a result, perhaps no more than thirty women have held key leadership positions in the major New York organizations mentioned above. Out of this nucleus I selected ten women for in-depth interviewing. Though they may not adequately represent the *distribution* of thinking among pioneering Jewish feminists, I believe they do represent the *range* of opinions and background of those responsible for modern Jewish feminism's seminal thinking and organizing. Table 1 shows how each respondent was actively involved in several leadership positions in the Jewish feminist movement and how all are interconnected by common background or activity.

TABLE 1
Jewish and Feminist Organizational Background of the Ten Respondents in the Study

Activity	N	H	E	R	C	J	W	L
A. A.		*	Y	Y	Y			
S. B.	Y				Y			
H. H.		Y	*					
P. H.		Y	Y	Y	Y			
L. K.		Y	Y	Y	Y			
A. M.						Y		
A. S.	*							Y
E. U.		Y					Y	
D. W.			Y		Y			
A. Z.	Y			Y	Y	Y		Y

Key: N = Network leadership position
H = Havurah member
E = Ezrat Nashim member
R = **Response** women's anthology editor
C = Conference on Jewish women organizer (either Conference or both)
J = JFO leader
W = N.Y. Jewish Women's Center leader
L = **Lilith** editor

Y = Yes, person qualifies formally for this description
* = Person qualifies but not formally

JEWISH FEMINISM: IDEOLOGICAL VARIATION AND CONFLICT REDUCTION

The attempt to embrace both Judaism and feminism, two frequently conflicting belief systems, produces varied reactions. One way to reduce the perceived tension between the two ideologies is to hold that they are actually compatible; or, even more radically, that acting in accord with one ideology actually enhances adherence to the other. We may call this type of resolution *conflict denial.*

Another tactic is to limit participation in the community of adherents committed to only one belief system. In other words, Jewish feminists may be expected to feel somewhat uncomfortable in the company of purely secular feminists or of conventional Jews. We may call this process *withdrawal.*

A further consequence of ideological strain is to mute one's criticism of both communities. For example, Jewish feminists are much less vehement in denouncing the Jewish community than are secular

feminists who have no profound attachment to it. We may call this process *moderation.*

A related technique is to circumvent areas in which the tension is most difficult to resolve. Potential conflict is obviated merely by refusing to consider, discuss, or act upon irreconcilable differences. This process may be termed *avoidance.*

These methods of reducing strain come into play among Jewish feminist activist-thinkers. The particular form of Jewish feminism a woman adopts is directly related both to her brand of Jewishness and to her interpretation of the lessons of feminism. As it turns out, the respondents have rather undifferentiated views of feminism; for them, it basically amounts to the application of the principle of equal opportunity to Jewish life. However, they bring their feminism to quite different versions of Jewishness. Jewish differentiation then leaves its imprint upon Jewish feminism, resulting in parallel differentiation among Jewish feminists.

The purpose of this section is to elaborate the results of the process of molding two inconsistent belief systems. I demonstrate that consequences of that process include: (1) differentiation among Jewish feminists largely determined by differentiation in their approaches to Jewish life; and (2) the use of tension-relieving mechanisms common to all types of Jewish feminists.

COMMUNALISTS, SPIRITUALISTS, AND HALACHIC SPIRITUALISTS

To the outsider, a social movement often appears monolithic. Differences of emphasis, or even outright conflicts, are buried beneath massive stereotypes. A peculiar or newsworthy aspect of the movement is often generalized to all of its many-sided reality. Such is the case with secular American feminism, where, in its early phase, the American news media seized upon its more sensational elements while ignoring significant ideological and factional differences (Tuchman, 1978). One should not make the same mistake analyzing Jewish feminists. Although Jewish feminists have not developed organized factions and well-articulated ideological strains, they are characterized by significant differences in nuance and emphasis which seem to be determined largely by one's Jewishness. Some women who apply feminist principles to Judaism come from a background of communal involvement in Jewish life. Hence, their primary Jewish activity, like the focus of their feminist thinking, lies in organizational activity. This brand of

feminists, who may be called *communalists*, includes women who led the fight to attain recognition for young UJA women leaders as well as activists battling the Jewish "establishment" in the Network circles of the early seventies. They are most concerned with issues of employment, power, decision-making, and the distribution of positions of honor or prestige.

Contrasted with these women are feminists whose Jewish involvement is primarily spiritual in nature. Their Jewish lives, more than those of communalists, revolve around celebration of the sabbath and the seasonal holidays, prayer and liturgy, and the observance of Jewish religious law. These women, who I call *spiritualists*, are more likely to be found in Chavurah circles and to be members of Ezrat Nashim. Their major concerns lie in the realm of ritual, law, liturgy and religious education.

When interviewed, communalists did not spontaneously mention the spiritual realm at all. The spiritualists, for their part, evinced mild disdain for the communalists. Two of them went so far as to wonder aloud why the communalists bother to identify themselves as specifically Jewish feminists.

While all Jewish feminists are devoted to the same overall movement and tend to express support for the other camp's principal concerns, few communalists count spiritualists among their close friends and vice versa. By definition, communalists are infrequent participants in either traditional or innovative Jewish religious life, whereas spiritualists have pioneered new liturgical forms as they immerse themselves in Jewish religious life.

The spiritual camp in itself further divided along lines analogous to boundaries in the wider Jewish community. Ezrat Nashim, the initial consciousness-raising and pressure group for women's rights within the Jewish community, consisted of women with deep roots in the Conservative branch of Judaism. Their most noteworthy political activity—lobbying Conservative rabbis and their wives at the 1972 Rabbinical Assembly convention—was directed at the Conservative movement (Nemy, 1972; Blau, 1973). Subsequent work by this group entailed advising the editor of a Conservative prayer book on extirpating sexist language from the English translation. They have encouraged women to study the Talmud and other religious texts and in their own religious practices—particularly as members of the New York Chavurah—they have implicitly adopted Conservative Judaism's view of flexible religious law and practices. They wish to modify the

law by changing its usage and practice rather than by relying more heavily upon explicit rabbinical injunction and reinterpretation. These, then, are "non-*halachic* spiritualists." Their view of religious law and custom is close to the Conservative model of permanence and change.

Some of the closest friends of the non-*halachic* spiritualists are those who are intent on pursuing permanent change in the halacha according to the Orthodox model of change, that is, via legal reinterpretation by the community of Orthodox rabbinical authorities. These "halachic spiritualists" see themselves as part of the contemporary and historic *halachic* community and view that community as the central source of both local and worldwide Jewish continuity. To them, change outside that community is of limited significance since it is of use only to those who do not view themselves as bound by the *halacha*. Such change is historically less meaningful than the thorough-going transformation they seek in the halacha itself.

Although the gulf between halachic and non-halachic spiritualists is much narrower than that separating spiritualists from communalists, there is a mutually respectful recognition that their long-range goals apply to different communities.

The ultimate aims of the one halachic spiritualist, and the tension that goes with her position, are exemplified in the following statement:

> I'm committed to change within the halachic system, that is, through precedents and legal fictions approved by recognized halachic authorities. However, if I feel it is essential, I may violate even this principle which I would rationalize by invoking another principle: religious *halutziyut* [pioneering], namely, helping rabbis justify halachic change. This process is just like the one followed by early religious Zionists who were opposed by their own day's rabbis, only to be vindicated years later by future rabbis. *Halutzim* [pioneers] have a heavy responsibility. They must be serious.

Although the conflict between the two kinds of spiritualists has tended to remain dormant, it does clearly emerge when feminists, often initially unaware of their differences, plan a women's *minyan* (prayer quorum). The motivation of each group is indeed quite distinct. Non-halachic spiritualists wish merely to afford women the opportunity to assume roles in the service previously off-limits to them, and to practice their newly learned liturgical skills in a setting free of the anxiety of "performing" in front of much more experienced men. The halachic spiritualists share these goals but have others as well: they seek to change the halacha regarding women's participation by convincing halachic authorities of their legitimacy as authentic halachic Jews. That dictum requires that they refrain from undertaking

perhaps 20% of the services that halachically require an all-male minyan. Because of their different goals, the two camps are faced with irreconcilable differences in planning and executing an all-women's prayer service.

Such splits as have already occurred are only a prefiguration of things to come in the opinion of one halachic spiritualist:

> There's a growing alienation between Orthodoxy and everything else in American Judaism. The organized Jewish community is having less to do with Orthodoxy while the Orthodox community is becoming more insular. In the next 10 to 15 years the Conservative movement will have women rabbis and we'll see many other changes as well. Feminism, along with other forces, will eventually split American Jewry into Orthodox and non-Orthodox camps even more severely than they are split now.

To summarize: the process of blending commitments to the Jewish community with a dedication to feminist principles results in a variety of styles of Jewish feminist thinking. These styles are predominantly determined by differences in approach to Jewish life rather than by differences in approach to feminism.

Although the feminist critique of Judaism encompasses communal, spiritual, and personal dimensions, only the first two have developed relatively crystallized schools of thought. One woman takes her colleagues to task for failing to concentrate on interpersonal relationships:

> I want to add something about the way Jewish feminists have dealt with social relationships. Radical feminists have explored these issues most deeply, but Jewish feminists have dealt with them only on the most superficial level. The general feminists spend a lot of time on topics like homosexuality, monogamous marriage and generally relating to men. They see personal relationships as the area where the most critical revolution will occur. Every personal relationship has political implications. In that area, Jewish feminists haven't ventured beyond consciousness raising.

When presented with this woman's criticism, other respondents answered in two ways. Some offered that their consciousness-raising sessions have indeed focused upon sexual, social, and interpersonal issues, but that these issues do not lend themselves to exploration in the form of articles, pamphlets, or protest activities. Concurrent views on the matter are summarized by a respondent who says, "Although there's plenty of it [concern with interpersonal affairs], I have difficulty in calling that *Jewish* feminism." Other reasons for the failure of Jewish feminists to take a coherent stand on interpersonal relations derive from the ways separate schools of thought have developed.

These schools imprint differences in Jewish approach upon one's feminism, or, alternatively, apply feminist principles to one's principal Jewish concerns. The fact is that there are among American Jews (1) communal Jewish secularists with lifestyles whose central Jewish identity revolves around activity in Jewish organizations; (2) non-halachic spiritualists, Conservative and chavurah-style Jews concerned with worship, liturgy, and holiday celebration who adopt a flexible attitude toward religious law; and (3) halachic spiritualists or members of a ritually observant Orthodox community, in one or another of its many varieties. But there is no extant contemporary school of "inter-personal" Jewish thought.

But whatever the variation of Jewish feminism, all are committed to dual belief systems that can and do give rise to conflict. The mechanisms by which Jewish feminists reduce that conflict is the topic to which I now return.

CONFLICT DENIAL: "IT'S GOOD FOR THE JEWS"

In a variety of ways, Jewish feminists declare that their simultaneous dedication to Judaism and feminism, far from being detrimental to the Jewish community is, to put it simply, "good for the Jews." All respondents are convinced that failure to adopt their goals will deprive American Jewry of talent so sorely needed that, without it, the community might collapse:

> There should be women rabbis, women scholars, women communal leaders. [The achievement of feminist goals] will bring in more minds, more ideas, more energies.

These feminists also feel sure that by rejecting obsolete sex-roles, the Jewish community will be more attractive to young people. They deny the antifeminist charge that their presence will cause many men to leave the fold:

> Women are excited by Jewish feminism. They are looking for a place for themselves within Judaism. It's good for Jewry in general and not only Jewish women that more women are studying Talmud. I have yet to see this trend drive any man out of the synagogue. God didn't mean women to be subordinate. Judaism is meant to be responsive to the needs of women as well as men. Without women, American Judaism will fold.

Another offered a rather distinctive reason for Judaism's stake in feminism:

> The whole rhythm of American society—the main components of white middle class America—is vulnerable to questions raised by the women's movement. Thus, if more diversity is permitted in American society, Judaism will benefit.

In short, although these women recognize some conflict between Judaism and feminism, their overwhelming conviction is that, on balance, feminism is not only beneficial for American Jewish life but essential to its preservation. In other words, the interests of Judaism and feminism are seen as basically in harmony.

WITHDRAWAL: INSIDERS VERSUS OUTSIDERS

Feminists can limit the extent to which they participate in a community that fails to meet their ideals. Only the halachic spiritualists whose goals presuppose working within preexisting structures cannot leave, and even they develop means of exit from conventional Jewish life. The other women are split between those who try to maintain their feminist principles while staying within the established Jewish community ("insiders") and those who find it necessary to conduct their Jewish lives outside the community's confines ("outsiders").

An example of the "outsider" philosophy applied to religious life is provided by Esther Ticktin, who has suggested that men adopt new religious commandments in solidarity with feminists struggling for equal status in the religious community:

> The particular Jewish *galut* [exile] experience that I ask us to remember is the experience of exclusion . . . we also remember what we expected of a decent, sensitive gentile in that situation. We expected him to express his sense of justice and common humanity by refusing to join a club or fraternity that excluded us as Jews. Is it too much to expect the same kind of decency of Jewish men in relation to us?
>
> The first category of the new *mitzvot lo t'aseh* [commandments of prohibition], then is based on the idea of not being a beneficiary of a policy of exclusion. . . . It consists of two parts:
>
> (1) Do not participate in a *minyan* [prayer quorum] which separates women behind a *mehitza* [barrier] *even if* the women assent to such a treatment. (2) Do not accept an *aliyah* [honorific role] in a *minyan* which does not call up women to the Torah [Ticktin, 1973: 84-85].

Ticktin elaborates two other commandments, one that enjoins a man from talking about an exclusively male religious experience to others (especially women) lest they feel pain at being excluded from that event. The other prohibits a man from joining in an all-male dancing circle.

Ticktin's opinions in the religious sphere are paralleled in the communal area by those of Betty Friedan: "'It's absolutely incumbent on Jewish women to protest and to withdraw their support from any Jewish organization that doesn't take action against sex and race discrimination.' As for the United Jewish Appeal's policy of not letting women be part of the Young Leadership Cabinet, Friedan said, 'Until there's a change, women shouldn't give to UJA, and they certainly shouldn't collect money for it'" (Stone, 1976: 41).

The basic principle that women should not work on behalf of organizations which perpetuate sexism in Jewish life has been enlarged into a full-fledged assault on volunteerism in Jewish organizations. According to this critique, the practice of volunteering to work on behalf of Jewish organizations has been substantially restricted to women. As such, it has become a vehicle for unjustly exploiting women's talents. Feminists who make the outsider's case see women as classic "enablers" on a grand scale: they perform low-prestige work for an organization or a community run by men. An arch-critic of women's volunteerism speaks her mind:

> In this society, people are paid for their work; there's an exchange of services. Where people aren't getting paid—such as women doing organizational work—the American Jewish community doesn't value their services.

Some feminists, however, have little sympathy for the "outsider" philosophy. One woman, who openly recognizes the contradiction between her personal conduct and her public philosophy, attends an Orthodox synagogue despite its separate seating for men and women. Another young UJA leader (not interviewed at length) has figured prominently in efforts to integrate UJA's all-male Young Leadership Cabinet. When asked, "What if these efforts fail?" she made it clear that she (and like-minded feminists) would not cease to work for the UJA.

Yet even committed "insiders" manage to withdraw from the conventional Jewish community so that they can conduct their Jewish lives in more egalitarian settings. For their part, the communalists are hardly to be found in conventional Jewish organizations. Their ac-

tivities are restricted to feminist enterprises and to dissident organizations such as Network or Breira (a short-lived national group of rabbis, students, intellectuals, and others, best known for promoting a more independent American Jewish stance toward Israel).

The non-halachic spiritualists are religiously active in groups like the New York chavurah or the West Side Minyan, which provide a fairly informal but highly egalitarian atmosphere for prayer, study, and holiday celebration.

Even halachic spiritualists feel compelled to take partial leave of coventional Jewry. They have adopted individualized solutions to their tensions. For example, the halachic community takes a dim view of those who pray alone when a minyan is available. Yet several halachic feminists, eager to assume their responsibilities as full-fledged members of the religious community but finding no milieu where they are accepted as equals, do resort to solitary prayer. Many speak of acute discomfort with the mores of conventional Orthodoxy and have taken to avoiding erstwhile friends from among its communities.

WITHDRAWAL: FOR WOMEN ONLY?

Withdrawing from the Jewish community to avoid sexism is matched by withdrawal of a different but related sort. Some Jewish feminists advocate the creation of various forums and institutions for women only, separate and apart from the conventional Jewish community. These feminists argue that separatism fortifies the characteristics peculiar to women and helps to protect them from intimidation by men. Detractors of this positions argue that it may serve to perpetuate the subordinate place of women by sanctioning their exclusion from predominantly male institutions.

These contradictory considerations are brought into focus by one feminist who has pioneered several institutions designed exclusively for the Jewish woman:

> With regard to expanding women's role in ritual, there are basically three options:
>
> (1) Adopt everything men do as a whole.
>
> (2) Write and perform new rituals by finding out what characterizes Jewish female spirituality.
>
> (3) Become satisfied with the role as it is. I opted for none of these and all of these and I'm not satisfied. The first option is unsatisfactory because it satisfies male

needs. The second is very difficult because Judaism is so heavily dependent on tradition.

One of several institutions she specifically designed was the first women's *Kolel* (a full-time Talmud study center). Another innovation was to expand the Rosh Hodesh (beginning of the Hebrew month, time of the New Moon) ceremony traditionally observed in synagogue services. Drawing upon ancient texts and symbolism, she designed a ceremony that celebrates what she calls women's "unique spirituality":

> [The ritual] offered unlimited opportunities for exploration of feminine spiritual qualities and experimentation with ritual, all within the framework of an ancient tradition which has survived up to the present day. . . . The celebration of Rosh Hodesh is a celebration of ourselves, of our uniqueness as women, and of our relationship to nature and to God [Agus, 1976: 84-85].

However, some Jewish feminists think that such institutions, be they of a ritual, liturgical, educational, political, or communal nature, not only deepen an already objectionable separation of the sexes but they also buttress ideologies supportive of that separation. One respondent presents a clear-cut unresolved dilemma dividing the feminists: "Do you want equality with men or do you want a unique spiritual expression for women?" Another opponent of sex-segregated institutions, says:

> Some of these developments are dangerous. They're too closely tied to biological differences between men and women. The real question is, are women limited by biology—how much does biology determine behavior? Shulamith Firestone argues that even if there are biological differences between men and women, modern society has learned to transcend them in so many spheres that we can now do it in toto with all sex-role differences. The problem with additional rituals only for women is that they place renewed emphasis on biology.

One woman, responding to this statement, said, "While I am opposed to separate education there's a difference when it comes to rituals which are very much tied to the life cycle," and hence to biological differences. "It may be bad politics, but good religion," to support the creation and practice of rituals built upon biological differences. "These rituals can only be 'dangerous' if they express bad values. But they're good if they enhance the expression of a person's spirituality." This respondent offers in evidence the example of childbirth and parenthood, suggesting that separate rituals for the new child's father and

mother would be altogether appropriate because each parent "goes through vastly different experiences."

Other ritual innovations mark: the birth of a girl, her first menstruation, menstruation itself, Bat Mitzvah, and marriage. While these attempts have provoked remarkably little rabbinical censure. Jewish feminists themselves admit to being dissatisfied with them. At issue is the difficult task of trying to express genuine feminist values while simultaneously staying true to the Jewish tradition. The respondents convey the impression that, in their minds, many of the proposed rituals fail either one or both criteria.

Even the very process of withdrawal to create alternative forms and institutions is laden with tension, for it, too, is caught in the bind of trying to reconcile two very different and often contradictory systems of belief and symbols.

MODERATION IN PURSUIT OF FREEDOM?

Despite their nearly equivocal support of feminist goals, these women find that their attachment to the Jewish community inevitably moderates every challenge to that community. The respondents give a variety of explanations for the conservatism in stance and moderation in tactics, all of which can be seen as variations on a theme: allegiance to the continued survival of Jewry and an unflinching desire to remain with its community. This state of mind unavoidably interferes with their full expression of purely feminist commitments and renders total rejection of the conventional (and sexist) Jewish subsociety very nearly unthinkable.

When asked to explain the restraint of Jewish feminists, respondents offered one or more of the following explanations:

—Judaism has a built-in rationale for women's subordinate position. The community, through its informal reward system, confers esteem on the Jewish woman who ably performs her traditional roles.

—Jewish feminists are also committed Jews. As members of an historically persecuted ethnic minority perpetually living in a Gentile society, they owe a certain allegiance to the Jewish community. Notwithstanding its sexism, they are restrained from rejecting that community.

—Jewish feminists have other public responsibilities connected with Judaism, such as Israel, Soviet Jewry, the synagogue, along with specific projects for the aged, the

sick, and the poor. With all that and more, few Jewish women are willing to become single-cause activists.

—Women are often not socialized to acquire the skills and drives that lend themselves to political organizing.

As one feminist succinctly put it when asked why the Jewish movement was so conservative: "Because of our Jewish commitments; if you leave the fold, you're not sure anyone will call you back."

The strain toward moderation is evident not only in a low level of hostility to the Jewish community, but also in an outright rejection of the viewpoint of general feminists that are seen as incompatible with the survival of the Jewish community. As one respondent reported:

> If feminism is taken right, it can be a big asset; but we have to avoid some negative aspects found in general feminism such as its positions on prostitution, abortion and Zero Population Growth. Jews have to worry about the Jewish population. I'm for the liberalization of abortion but it has to be approached correctly.

Moderation demands a certain distancing from the larger movement:

> I find some of the political statements of general American feminists particularly repugnant. I reject the idea of female domination as a desirable goal. I do not believe that men as such have caused all of the world's problems.

Or, even more emphatically:

> Jewish feminists are committed to a Jewish community where men and women are inherently equal. Jewish feminism is not founded on any one ideology or organization—it's a perspective on living your life a certain way. . . . We're not radical or revolutionary.

Other observations regarding the moderate and conservative caste of Jewish feminism are also enlightening:

> More of us want a piece of the pie than a new cake. All Jewish feminists want in some sense to participate fully, but how much more fully and in what way is a matter of dispute or hasn't even reached the level of active dispute. There's very little questioning of basic structures. Jewish feminism is middle class and reformist.

A few Jewish feminists are not enthusiastic about their activist colleagues joining the organized community; they disclaim any personal desire to have "a piece of the pie." Rather, they are interested in "applying feminist principles and values to change the nature of the community."

Nevertheless, Jewish feminists, when compared with their secular counterparts, are relatively timid in tactics and moderate in substance when confronting the conventional Jewish community they seek so fervently to change.

AVOIDANCE

The fourth and final mechanism for minimizing conflict is avoidance. The Jewish feminists I interviewed, while conceding differences in orientation, tend to deny any open or serious ideological conflict within their movements. The large-scale conferences which rally Jewish feminists of varying persuasions are devoted more to pooling of insight and experience than to debate over their validity. Participants uniformly report leaving those conferences with a "high," a spirit of solidarity and good feeling for all their sisters.

A second avenue of avoidance manifests itself in outright refusal to consider positions whose adoption might explode into conflict with Jewish values. This process is almost indistinguishable from the moderation just discussed. I labeled the rejection of certain positions endorsed by many general feminists as "moderation." But the impeachment made by one respondent against her activist colleagues is much more severe:

> Jewish feminists feel themselves *unable* to consider the extremist postitions on personal relationships—like lesbianism, or alternatives to the nuclear family.

Generally, Jewish feminists, like most people, find conflicts exceedingly painful—whether among themselves or between themselves and the conventional Jewish community. Avoidance, and the three other mechanisms described above, are methods to reduce that potential conflict and thereby reduce the discomfort entailed in adopting contradictory belief systems.

BECOMING A JEWISH FEMINIST

The foregoing section demonstrated several ways Jewish feminists combine or reconcile two conflicting ideologies. Of course, other options are available. Most obviously one could abandon either commitment, implying unconditional loyalty either to general feminism or

to conventional Judaism. That Jewish feminists find ideological reconciliation more attractive than outright abandonment testifies to the strength of both their feminism and their Judaism. What's quite striking and even paradoxical is that they chooose to do so within a society where thousands of educated women like themselves have opted for neither or only one or the other commitment (i.e., feminism and identification with one's religious or ethnic community).

But what is mysterious to the outsider is certainly more than understandable to the alleged "deviants." I now propose to trace the route by which these women decided they must maintain a dual loyalty to at least two communities, two belief systems, two sets of imperatives. As each respondent reviews her life history, her evolution as a Jewish feminist appears quite logical and seemingly inevitable. Commitments both to Judaism and feminism are traced by the respondents to childhood:

> I remember two things. First, when I was in fourth grade I was fascinated with the suffragette movement. I remember I was telling somebody that I was very upset that there was so little in the encyclopedia on the movement. The second thing happened in sixth grade when I wanted to be the first woman president. Everyone laughed at me.

Alternatively, when we asked one woman to recall her first experience which led her to feminism, she replied, "There wasn't any one experience. I was always a feminist."

Some recall early feminist revelations in a Jewish context:

> At *Simchas Torah* [religious holiday], when I was 14 or so, we youngsters were encouraged to dance around the Torahs. I was so angry when the rabbi asked the girls to stop dancing. Even though I knew all about *Taharat Mishpacha* [Laws of Family Purity], I didn't think girls wouldn't be allowed to dance on the *Bimah* [altar-stage].

In sum, the mature commitment as an adult to feminism and to Judaism can be traced to an evolutionary beginning in childhood and early adolescence. It is the purpose of this section to explicate that two-phased evolution. I begin with respondents' feminist roots.

EGALITARIANISM AND ENCOURAGEMENT

The feminist roots of our respondents are classifiable into two sorts of growing-up experiences. First, they report relationships in their

families of origin approaching the egalitarian model; second, they report parental encouragement to achieve intellectually and professionally—while remaining women in a more traditional mold.

While it is not altogether clear that these aspects of early family life actually shaped the future feminism of our respondents, one can at least be sure that they emerged as the salient aspects that are most vividly recalled today. The descriptions of relative egalitarianism do seem accurate at least in part if one considers their detail and some pieces of incontrovertible evidence:

> My family was quite egalitarian. Both my parents worked as high school teachers. I was glad my mother worked. I felt it was a bonus in that I could be more independent. My mother, by having a great deal of investment in her work, didn't envelop me.

Mother's employment outside the home is a recurrent theme among the respondents:

> My mother is a high school teacher. My father is a lawyer.... My father did housework. My mother did cleaning and cooking but didn't wait upon us hand and foot.

This response also supplies persuasive evidence of relative egalitarianism:

> All my life I was raised as liberated in some ways. I had the model of a working mother. . . . My grandmother did a lot of chores and freed my mother to work outside the home. More important, my father helped with those household chores, although, in the end, my mother was basically responsible for the house.

> My father showed my mother was a person deserving of respect and he treated her as an equal, a person with dignity. She was a woman who cooked and sewed, but they treated each other with mutual respect.

As noted, this recollection of egalitarianism extends beyond the housework division of labor to the undeniable encouragement for achievement they received from their parents. Virtually every Jewish daughter in our sample offered similar accounts:

> All my life, at least up to a point, I was raised to be liberated. My mother worked. My parents impressed upon me the need to achieve in school and in the Jewish community and to think about a career and to succeed professionally.

Although respondents were generally impressed with the need to achieve, to pursue a professional career, and to occupy themselves

in the world of the intellect, many felt that they (like their professionally successful female counterparts throughout American society) were given a second message by their parents, one not entirely compatible with the first. They were simultaneously reared to marry and raise a family in the traditional fashion:

> My mother was conflicted about being an American and a Jew. She taught me it's important to be a mother and a wife while also having a career, but not how to balance those roles. She wanted me to go for a Ph.D. and also gave me the message that being married and having children are a good thing, presumably requiring all your time.

After expanding upon the pride her parents took in their three daughters' intellectual ability, an academician with two children of her own adds:

> But they were surprised that we all wanted careers. They expected our lives to end after college. My mother feels I'm cheating myself by not being a full-time housewife.

These early family experiences nurtured a receptivity to feminism. That receptivity eventually turned to outright adoption of feminist principles.

Prior to the interviews, I expected that Jewish feminists would recall one or two revelatory experiences that plunged them into the feminist movement. In fact, most respondents report a much smoother process, one that was slow, steady, and developmental in character.

Between 1970 and 1972, and in a few instances somewhat earlier, these women undertook various actions that brought them closer to American feminism. In this heyday of the movement they typically joined secular consciousness-raising groups and devoured the classic feminist literature. They ranged in age from their late teens to mid-twenties. Thus, their affiliation with American feminism should be seen not as an age effect, but as a period effect coming at a specific time in American history when the basic principles of modern feminism were being widely diffused among professionals and intellectuals:

> In September, 1969 I found out about the women's movement. I started going to Baltimore's women's center where I got totally turned on. I read everything, especially Kate Millet, *Off Our Backs*, and *The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm*. This gave me an important perspective on things. I put a feminist filter on everything I did. I was in a women's CR group that went on for a year. I did volunteer birth control and abortion counseling.

Other resondents also report a sense of acquiring a new, all-encompassing perspective, or what some may call a new meaning-structure:

> In the spring of 1970, I started to read and read a lot. Women writers were telling me about my life! I read *Towards a Women's Liberation Movement, RAT,* Kate Millet, Shulamith Firestone, *Women in Sexist Society.* Certain phenomena began to make sense. I understood then what had been happening. . . . I joined a Jewish CR group.

Or, from a woman on joining her first consciousness-raising group: "My whole concept of myself as a human being changed—it was a watershed experience."

These vignettes do not negate the generalization that feminist perspectives grew steadily and slowly from an early point in life. They do suggest that those seeds came to fruition and suddenly flowered in a moment of recognition. A lifetime of preparation for the feminist philosophy caused it to resonate with a deep, immediate, and lasting impact.

FAMILY AND FRIENDS

The maintenance of a Jewish affiliation in adult life would come as no surprise to the respondents' close friends and family who themselves are often Jewishly involved. But the out-and-out adoption of feminism, even within a Jewish framework, might cause ridicule or other forms of social opprobrium. However, if the model of supportive, developmental socialization is sound, then the feminists' close friends and family should support these women in their newly discovered belief system. Reactions on a continuum from mere tolerance to real pride might be expected. And this is what questions about "significant others" and their reaction to respondents' Jewish feminism evoke:

> Most people admire and respect my involvement, especially my parents. Some don't understand either the Jewish or the feminist part.

The circle of support is readily apparent for this respondent:

> My friends by and large are feminists. My old friends are in sympathy. I don't relate to anti-feminist women. My father is thrilled.

But some women experience mixed reactions:

> My father took a liking to it. He's very proud of me. My mother thinks it will prevent me from getting married. The rest of my family runs the gamut of opinion.

There is a tendency for feminists to select or maintain friendships with like-minded people and to reject those with traditionalist views. One woman, married to a physician, declares: "Most of my friends are sympathetic to feminism. But, I've had a difficult time with medical wives."

In a word, from still another source: "Nobody's surprised."

This supportive social environment is comparable to that of New Left radicals recounted in life histories gathered by Glazer (1969), Kenniston (1968), and others. Far from rebelling against their parents, radical youth of the late sixties very often translated world views intentionally or unintentionally imparted to them by left-liberal parents. Far from being scorned, these "red diaper babies" were loved, admired, and warmly defended by their parents.

JEWISH ROOTS: STRONG AND DEEP, BUT FLEXIBLE, TOO

While feminist roots may be a little more fanciful than the respondents suggest, there can be no doubt about the potency of their Jewish socialization. Most were raised by ritually observant parents, had thorough Jewish instruction, went to summer camps with intensive religious and cultural programming, and spent some time in Israel. All this generally preceded any conscious association with feminism.

The depth of Jewish commitment and its variety of styles is typified by these reminiscences:

> I was raised in an Orthodox Jewish family. My father is a rabbi with a strong intellectual bent. . . . My mother is emotionally more religious while my father is more intellectual. I went to Ramaz Yeshiva which probably would have been too progressive for my family had not my father been teaching there.

The Conservative movement also spawned its share of Jewish feminists:

> I was raised in a Conservative home, one that wasn't too religious. We ate non-kosher food out. I went to Hebrew School. At age 12, I started going to Camp Ramah. I was very much more involved in Jewish life than my parents. I went to Hebrew School through high school; in fact, I've always been engaged in some

kind of Jewish study. I took courses in college and then courses at the Jewish Theological Seminary. The Havurah, which I helped start in 1968, has been central to my Jewish identity.

On the secular side of Jewish socialization, we find a rebellion against it—into Orthodox Judaism:

My grandmother lived with us and spoke Yiddish. My mother had gone to a Yiddish school. Both my parents are Labor Zionists. There were a lot of Israeli products and records in the home. They were active in Jewish organizations. My lullabies were Hebrew or Yiddish songs. Bedtime stories were about Jewish heroes. I was close to my grandparents, who also weren't religiously observant but were strongly oriented to Israel and affected by the Holocaust. At about 13 I started to keep Kosher. I went to a Zionist camp. I put pressure on at home for my mother to light candles and my father to say kiddush (Friday evening prayer). I forced my parents to make the kitchen kosher. At 18 I went to Israel for a year. I decided I wanted to keep *Shabbes*. I became completely religious.

Religious or not, Jewish identity is as complex as it is multidimensional. Early on, in one version or another, these women acquired such an identity. Given this attachment, they were imbued not only with a sense of personal autonomy, but with the legitimacy of experimenting in ritual and institutional matters. They also learned to be reflective and introspective individuals. All these traits were also nurtured at home:

My parents are observant Conservative Jews—*Shomer Shabbes* [Sabbath observers] and Kosher. They don't deal with things on a strictly *halachic* level. If there ever was a question on *halacha*, my father would just think about it and make a reasoned decision. He believes *halacha* is made to help you live Jewishly and not hamper you.

The importance of autonomy even within a highly developed legalistic tradition is illuminated in these remarks:

My father, who himself had gone to Yeshiva, studied Talmud with me. My parents were not religious. My father knew the tradition but decided for himself what he was going to do. My mother didn't remember much about religion, but they felt it very important for me to know and to make my own decisions.

We see here the tendency to question one's own assumptions, a tendency that would serve to legitimate breaking with doctrinaire aspects of the Jewish (and feminist) belief systems:

I went to Yeshiva of Flatbush for 12 years and to Midrasha for two years at night. I went to Jewish camps like Ezra, Yavneh and Ramah. My first exposure to Jewish problems was at Ramah. I was asked questions I wasn't prepared to answer. I

> started thinking there were maybe two ways of doing things, both of which could be right.

In sum, there are three elements that contribute to an understanding of how certain women felt compelled to adopt two conflicting belief systems and then adapt them to one another. First, their upbringing, which was characterized by more than the average measure of egalitarianism combined with encouragement to strive for intellectual and professional achievement. Second, in the late sixties and early seventies they steeped themselves in feminist literature, and participated in consciousness-raising groups. Third, most of these women were deeply rooted in the Jewish community. Their Jewishness, however, placed a premium on flexibility and autonomy. As a result, they were able to reconcile Jewish and feminist belief systems, and to develop variegated styles of Jewish feminism.

ORGANIZED JEWISH FEMINISM

Jewish feminism revolves around the tension between two communities, two belief systems, two modes of action. Since gaps must be covered, bridge-building is the essence of Jewish feminism.

Ideologically, Jewish feminism stands between women's liberation and conventional Judaism. But structurally, Jewish feminism clearly falls within the range of organizational models characterizing American feminism. Feminism, whether of the secular or Jewish variety, is a segmented, loosely structured social movement. Both varieties consist of adherents organized in small groups, some built around continuing projects, and others functioning on an ad hoc basis, dealing with issues as they arise. Most "leaders" of either movement are unable or unwilling to exert the kind of control exercised by their opposite numbers in hierarchically structured organizations. Between the two movements there is of course a huge demographic difference. For this and other reasons, the secular feminist movement can generate and maintain large-scale organizations, while miniscule offshoots can hardly be expected to do the same.

Nevertheless, with appropriate adjustment for size, organizational similarities are striking. I come to this conclusion by examining a few critical issues: How did Jewish feminist organizations originate? How did they structure their operations? How have they been able to provide for their continued existence? In attempting to answer these questions, I

find that studies of large feminist organizations are on the whole applicable to the movement's Jewish offshoots.

ORIGINS

Jo Freeman's (1975) study of the American women's liberation movement offers the most sophisticated analysis to date of the origins of that movement. Drawing upon the broader literature of social movements, Freeman sets forth four conditions she believes to have been central in the emergence of American feminism.

Her first proposition postulates "the need for a pre-existing communications network or an infrastructure" (Freeman, 1975: 48). In the case of American feminism, that infrastructure evolved out of national "Commissions on the Status of Women and the 'radical community' whose leaders created a communications network through which those women initially interested in creating an organization could easily reach others" (p. 63).

Freeman's second proposition requires that the "communications network" be "cooptable to the new ideas of the incipient movement." Moreover, "it must be composed of like-minded people predisposed to be receptive to the particular ideas of a new movement through their own backgrounds, experience, or location in the social structure" (p. 48). Later, she adds a particularly pertinent specification:

> A social system which has a value "innovativeness" itself (as the radical community did) will more rapidly adopt ideas than one which looks upon the habitual performance of traditional practices as the ideal (as most organized women's groups did in the fifties) [p. 68].

Third (and fourth), Freeman postulates that the emergence of a social movement requires a crisis and/or an organizing cadre (or individual):

> Given the existence of a cooptable communications network, or at least the rudimentary development of a potential one, and a situation of strain, one or more precipitants are required. . . . In one, a crisis usually one or more events that symbolically embody the underlying discontent galvanizes the network into spontaneous action in a new direction. In the other, one or more persons begin organizing a new organization or disseminating a new idea. [pp. 48-49].

If Freeman's propositions can be extended to Jewish feminism, they should be applicable to the origins of the movement in general, and to the origins of specific organizations.

On the general level, we find that Jewish institutions of the youth counterculture provided Jewish feminist "leaders" their communication network. As noted, the late sixties and early seventies were times of concerted political and religious activity on the part of young people. Future Jewish feminists met and established friendships in the context of these general activities. In particular they were often members of the New York Chavurah, leaders in Network, participants in protest activities (e.g., the picketing of a national convention of Jewish charitable leaders in Boston, 1969) or led sit-ins (e.g., at the offices of New York's Jewish Federation, the central local philanthropic organization, in the spring of 1970). Moreover, the Jewish feminist movement's earliest organized endeavors spawned more networks which provided the leadership for additional projects and organizations.

The network's cooptability has already been demonstrated. These women were accustomed to criticising the conventional Jewish community; they were comfortable with the notion of autonomy and flexibility in one's Jewish self-identification; and in the early seventies feminism, flourishing as never before, was particularly attractive to young intellectuals.

Besides activism, Jewish autonomy, and flexibility, and the climate of feminism, one more factor should be noted. It is the "relative deprivation" of white, professional women which underlay much of the discontent that fueled the women's liberation movement (Freeman, 1975: 35-43). This concept offers a partial explanation of why working-class women were less often attracted to the feminist movement and indeed were more often hostile to its goals than their middle-class counterparts. Similarly, the Jewish women of Network and the Chavurah who already had had a taste of relatively egalitarian communal and ritual participation suffered most sharply from feelings of relative deprivation of the Jewish variety. They, rather than women in conventional Jewish organizations who knew only absolute ritual and communal deprivation, bridled at being inhibited from full involvement in Jewish life.

Freeman's third and fourth factors—an initiating crisis or an organizing cadre—are not observable on a grandiose scale in Jewish feminism. Instead, the applicability of Freeman's propositions again is made manifest only upon close examination of what have been the four key organizations: Ezrat Hashim; the Jewish Feminist Organization; the New York Jewish Women's Center; and *Lilith* magazine. Ezrat Nashim's history offers the most vivid corroboration of Free-

man's propositions at work with respect to a particular organization. (Silverstein, 0000). The group's origins may be divided into two phases: the creation of a women's study group; and that group's transformation into a self-conscious tight-knit organization devoted to advocating women's rights within the Jewish community.

The study group was organized in the fall of 1971 by two women in the New York Chavurah. They were responding to what they regarded as infuriating statements by one of the Chavurah's most respected male members on the male symbolism in the Friday night service. The two women pulled together a weekly study group consisting of some female Chavurah members, some of their friends outside the Chavurah, and one woman whose knowledge of the Talmud made her an excellent resource person for the fledgling circle. Interestingly, all four of Freeman's elements—the network, its cooptability, a crisis, and an organizing cadre (of two women)—were present in the formation of this pre-Ezrat Nashim study group. It constituted a preexisting cooptable network with informal leaders and organizers who were spurred on by two other crises to further action and a more conscious sense of organization:

> The way Ezrat Nashim got together was basically over a misunderstanding. We had heard that BN [Boston-based editor of *Response* magazine] was calling together an elitist conference restricted to men. This got everyone angry and we organized a counter-conference in Boston. As it turned out, he just got together eight of his male friends. Some of us at the counter-conference wanted an organization. When we returned to New York, PH and I pushed for a political action at the upcoming convention of the Rabbinical Assembly [Conservative Jewry's rabbinical organization].

The group's lobbying and protest activities at the rabinical convention in the spring of 1972 fully established Ezrat Nashim as the central address for Jewish feminism over the next year or two. The loosely structured group of about a dozen friends and emerging activists was flooded with requests from the conventional Jewish community for speakers, materials, and counseling.

The Jewish Feminist Organization represented an attempt to create a nationwide linkage of Jewish feminist chapters; its origins also go back to a preexisting, cooptable network, one that jelled at the 1974 Network-sponsored conference of women and men. Although no particular crisis inspired the establishment of this formal organization, a dedicated organizing cadre of women, most of whom had known one

another through prior Jewish youth and feminist activities, launched JFO. For a year or more following the conference, a dedicated core group attempted to firmly establish a national organization devoted to women's rights in the Jewish community. It emphasized the provision of speakers, the publications of bibliographies and materials on Jewish feminism, public representation of Jewish women, the convocation of local conferences, and organizing local chapters.

Interestingly, Ezrat Nashim's women, a likely leadership cadre for the emerging JFO, declined to join. As they tell it, Ezrat Nashim activists had grown tired of filling requests for speakers, materials, and bibliographies. They saw JFO as the organization that would relieve them of the self-imposed burden of spreading the feminist gospel. Thus, JFO leadership was deprived at the start of women with experience and talent in the very activities which JFO would try to undertake.

In part because of inexperience and ineptitude, the JFO faltered and disappointed some of its early supporters. The decline of Jewish feminist activities in New York activated one dedicated feminist, a rabbinical student at Reform Judaism's New York seminary, to organize the JFO College Outreach Project. But her eventual failure in 1975-1976 and that of her successor in 1976-1977, to form a self-perpetuating organization also illustrate the applicability of Freeman's propositions.

The JFO College Outreach Project (renamed the New York Jewish Women's Center in 1976) was essentially the attempt of a single part-time staff member to organize a variety of activities for young New York Jewish women. These included retreats, classes, discussion groups, lectures, and women's religious services. But all this effort proceeded without a preexisting cooptable network. Women attracted to the project's activities came from dispersed campuses and neighborhoods throughout the New York area. Few of them knew one another beforehand. Individual activities provided the focus around which groups of two or three women would coalesce. But, the overall challenge of planning a metropolitanwide program failed to attract sufficient interest to build an organizing cadre with overarching goals. Moreover, during this period, there was no crisis that could forge this loosely connected coterie into coherent action.

Lilith magazine, a more successful venture, also provides evidence in support of Freeman's propositions. It too originated mainly in a Network conference, the one for women only in 1973. Freeman suggests that a viable movement needs either a crisis or an organizer. While no crisis spurred *Lilith* into existence, a highly skilled, dedicated, and

strategically placed organizer was instrumental in its founding. As she recalls *Lilith*'s start:

> In the winter of 1971-72 I did the issue of *Off Our Backs* [a left-wing movement] periodical on the Jewish woman. It was the first Jewish woman's thing in the general movement. We felt we had to do something ourselves, and that gave us the idea of *Lilith*. We decided there really should be a magazine for Jewish women. After that, there was the Network Women's Conference at which we talked about it.

This organizer found herself at the intersection of several social circles from within which she could locate others interested in founding the first Jewish feminist periodical. She was active in Network leadership circles, was a well-known Jewish feminist, and, having held various editorial posts, was immersed in Jewish journalism. (A year before organizing the *Lilith* core group she had been managing editor of *Hadassah*, a magazine with the largest circulation of any Jewish periodical in the United States.)

To summarize: the four groups under study—Ezrat Nashim, JFO, the JFO College Outreach Project/N.Y. Jewish Women's Center, and *Lilith* magazine—all vividly illustrate the applicability of Freeman's four propositions to their origins. Where three or more elements were present, as with Ezrat Nashim and *Lilith*, the organizing efforts were successful. Where a critical element was missing as in the two other cases, organizing efforts produced groups that would soon disappear.

STRUCTURE

Students of the American feminist movement report specific attributes, allegedly characteristic of its adherents. Cassell, for example, writes:

> Here are a set of traits—egalitarianism; self-realization; sisterhood; cooperation; collectivism; a concern for personal experience; and a repudiation of power, hierarchy, and leadership—that are sometimes perceived as female characteristics as opposed to male. . . . The opposite pole of radical egalitarianism, where all differences are to be erased is hierarchy, where status differences are stressed. Self-actualization is contrasted with repression; sisterhood and cooperation with exclusion and coercion; personal experience with sterile abstraction; and collectivism with oppressive individualism [1977: 150].

Within this configuration of values, many feminist groups make collective decisions only after the widest possible consultation. There

seems to be an inherent distrust of expertise and of its conventional symbols (Cassell, 1977: 160-165).

Such descriptions are consistent with, if not extensions of, the organizational ethic pervading the youth and student movements of the sixties. Jewish feminist organizations, emerging out of the youth subculture highly influenced by the "movement" might be expected to emulate its organizational values. Alternatively, as moderate feminists, they might be expected to adopt the organizational style common to less radical groups.

In fact, none of the four organizations ever adopted a radically egalitarian structure or sought to abolish formal leadership. But—at the opposite extremes—they reject the rigidity and formalism of conventional voluntary associations. They prefer collective and decentralized decision-making to vesting power in elected officials.

Members of Ezrat Nashim report that in its first months, some women were concerned that those more experienced in feminist organizing, or the more articulate, would come to dominate the group. That this concern was shared by "natural leaders" and "followers" alike is a measure of the extent to which notions of nonhierarchical decision-making permeated their thought. Today, a veteran member reports that "the group is highly egalitarian; there are no hard rules; there's lots of mutual support and respect."

The Jewish Feminist Organization found it necessary to adopt the formal structures of a national board and regional delegates. However, the group's main projects—e.g., preparing materials, a speaker's bureau, preparing a New York regional conference—were assigned to autonomous committees, and these committes were responsible to the entire board rather than a single titular leader.

Lilith magazine adopted a compromise between the hierarchical structure of most periodicals' staffs and the collective editorial arrangements of many "movements" publications. Editorial tasks such as solicitation and copy-editing, plus some business aspects of the magazine, are assigned on a permanent basis to individuals. But the board makes final editorial decisions on a collective basis.

The staff director of the New York Jewish Women's Center attempted to involve a diversity of women in decision-making. Individual projects—e.g., retreats, the women's prayer service—were usually planned and implemented by committees. Again, aside from the paid staff person, no single individual emerged as a powerful political force within the small group of women involved in the center's overall policies.

In all four organizations, then, leadership was exercised on a collective basis in conformity with the organizational ethic of many other feminist groups. In no instance and at no time after an organization's initial establishment, did any woman serve as a figure of central leadership.

ACTIVITY AND CONTINUITY

Freeman's study implicitly linked the probability of a feminist group's survival with the nature of the activities it undertook:

> While the rap groups have been excellent techniques for changing individual attitudes, they tend to flounder when their members have exhausted the virtues of consciousness-raising and decide they want to do something more concrete. Some groups take on specific projects, such as working on day care; . . . some become study groups and delve more thoroughly into feminist and political literature; most just dissolve and their members look for other feminist activities to join. . . . Production of a feminist publication is one of the most feasible for a small group to handle [Freeman, 1975: 118-119].

Freeman stipulates certain characteristics of well-functioning social movement groups. For instance, it "is task oriented." It is "relatively small and homogeneous." It fosters "a high degree of communication" and "a low degree of skill specialization" where "everything must be able to be done by more than one person in order for no one to be indispensable" (p. 124). Further, "task groups are not created so easily; especially when one must do so from scratch," and "participatory groups frequently must become closed to new members because of the time and emotional investment required to build up the trust, acceptance and mutual understanding necessary for their successful functioning. . . . A tremendous amount of time must be spent on group process rather than group ends (p. 125).

Jewish feminists ideologically place themselves somewhere between two conflicting belief systems. However, their groups were formed out of the same student and young adult "movement" subculture that influenced the secular feminist movement. It should follow that the same structural processes which have been detected among secular feminist groups should also inhere in Jewish feminist organizations.

Ezrat Nashim and the *Lilith* magazine editorial collective are small groups with about a dozen and half a dozen participants respectively. Each consists of friends with interpersonal ties so strong that they find it difficult to accept new members. In particular, in 1971-1973,

when Ezrat Nashim was the only viable Jewish feminist group, it was severely criticized in some quarters for alleged elitism. The organization recruited few new members and even they tended to be friends of old members. The group was small, cohesive and exclusive. It remains intact.

Task orientation has also proved to be a preservative. As Freeman notes, putting out a magazine—such as *Lilith*—is a fairly ordered, not terribly complex task. In interpersonal relations, it poses much less of a threat than the more diffuse task of creating an organized movement (the goal of JFO and the center). Early in its existence, Ezrat Nashim faced the crisis of most consciousness-raising groups. At a certain point the members found that they had discussed most of the topics basic to feminist consciousness-raising even with the added agenda of a Jewishly oriented group. An interviewee responding to the question, "What goes on in your CR group?" said:

> It's usually like any other CR group—we talk about men, children, sex, family. There is a Jewish component too as we talk about Jewish childrearing, political issues, birth ceremonies, *bris* [circumcision], abortion, *Simchas Torah.*

But, she recalls a crisis:

> After the initial CR group ran its course, we were thinking of splitting up, but we decided to stay together partially out of friendship.

Ezrat Nashim members, either singly or in groups of twos and threes, have taken on specific projects, mostly related to the production of books and articles: one coauthored a volume on the *American Jewish Women*; another edited a revised and expanded version of the *Response* anthology; still another edited a pamphlet on the naming ceremonies of girl babies. Ezrat Nashim overcame the early CR crisis by sustaining friendships and investing energy in several specific projects.

The Jewish Feminist Organization and the New York Jewish Women's Center had none of the advantages stipulated by Freeman. Neither was blessed with a preexisting or emergent network of friendship ties. neither had a narrowly defined task—such as putting out a magazine or just meeting for social reasons—upon which they could fall back when other ventures failed. Both were plagued by diffuse and amorphous goals well beyond the capabilities of their limited personnel. The impeccable advantage of hindsight makes these failures entirely understandable.

THE FUTURE

Prediction is always risky. Yet developments already visible in the movement we have been analyzing and in Jewish communal life are certainly portentous.

The demise of the Jewish Feminist Organization and the New York Jewish Women's Center in 1976 and 1977 dealt a serious blow to the movement. Their passing meant that a national constituency and its largest local segment were bereft of centralized institutions. Those institutions filled a dual function: to educate the Jewish public on women's rights and to provide an agenda for the movement. Their eclipse signaled the end of a phase filled with confrontation, victory, defeat, and a high level of communal attention which peaked in 1972-1974. Jewish communal events now take place without the response or input of organized Jewish feminists.

For example, Ezrat Nashim's protest at the 1972 convention of Conservative Judaism's Rabbinical Assembly captured both Jewish and general media attention. Five years later, the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America included an all-male panel on the status of women at its annual convention with scarcely a word of protest from Ezrat Nashim or other erstwhile activists.

The absence of protest is indicative of movement away from overt protest activities on the part of Jewish feminists. The reasons for this change are several. For one, the noise and hoopla associated with the onset of a social movement cannot be maintained ad infinitum. Certain individuals, organizations and methods of agitation are suitable only for raising an issue; they are inappropriate for effecting systemic change across a broad front. Jewish feminists today sense that their agenda is taken more and more seriously by organized Jewry. They recognize proponents of their cause within the Jewish establishment who can be more effective in promoting change than any cadre of external agitators.

An additional reason for the turn away from confrontation lies in the influence of general feminism upon Jewish feminism. During the middle seventies, American feminists focused much of their attention on lobbying and legislative activity. This change in tactics coincided with a decline of journalistic interest in women's protest activities.

This seemingly depressing picture for activist Jewish feminist partisans can be counterpoised against what is seen by the respondents as deep-seated changes in Jewish life, changes which are partially a direct result of their efforts and, in large measure, are a result of

the impact of secular American feminism upon Jewish communal decision-makers.

Conservatism is Judaism's largest American branch. When Ezrat Nashim assailed its Rabbinical Assembly, a truly agonizing examination of Conservative Judaism's law on women in the minyan [prayer quorum] took place. And the law was reversed: women became equals. This legal change inspired more and more Conservative synagogues to reassess the role of women in their congregations; long-standing prohibitions pertaining to public ritual and institutional governance were overturned. The "women's issue" has touched virtually every Conservative synagogue in the United States, and, not surprisingly, vain efforts to alter a particular congregation's policy one year, have with continued pressure, achieved some success in subsequent attempts.

Meanwhile, even the tradition-bound Orthodoxy paid attention to internal stirrings among devout women who seek halachically permissible change to diminish role difference between Orthodox men and women.

Additionally, the United Jewish Appeal and local Jewish federations have also become arenas for agitation by women demanding greater participation in decision-making and greater access to positions of prestige and esteem (Cohen et al., 1976; Stone, 1976-1977; Solender, 1977).

Without exception, members of the elite group with which I spoke expressed unshakeable optimism in the ultimate triumph of their cause:

> Feminism has already had a big impact. You can tell that by the Orthodox rabbis who have spoken out in opposition to dogmatic traditionalism. There are now courses on Jewish women, frequent articles, Bat Mitzvahs and new birth ceremonies even among the Orthodox. The process will continue. It will expand. Ultimately much more will happen, by following the usual Jewish procedure of evolution, in each generation Judaism picks up practices and incorporates them with the highest Jewish values.

Another Jewish feminist foresees changes in several specific areas of religious life:

> In X years, no one will give a second thought to equal education and equal treatment under the marital laws. Rituals will take longer to change. But we are evolving into an egalitarian society. Even in Orthodoxy, women are taking control of synagogue affairs and we're beginning to see equal education in Stern College [Yeshiva University's women's college] and with the Kollel.

Whether these optimistic forecasts will be proven accurate will depend on a few critical factors. None matters more than the continued furtherance of feminism in American society. Insofar as that movement is successful in winning new adherents and in securing more legislative action, one can anticipate concomitant change in American Jewry.

A second key consideration is the extent to which changes in Jewish life achieved by feminists and their sympathizers will develop a dynamic of their own. Thus, the continuous rise of women to positions formerly reserved for men establishes one kind of legitimacy. The institution of new ritual procedures in some synagogues or other religious institutions, accords another kind of legitimacy for additional change in different settings and contexts. With more Jewish children raised to accept and expect a greater degree of egalitarianism in Jewish life, it is hard to see how such change can be significantly reversed. It is reasonable to expect large scale change if only to accomodate increasing numbers of young people generally more sympathetic to egalitarianism than their elders.

A final factor, applying particularly to the Orthodox, involves the degree of integration of insularity various segments of American Jewry will maintain toward secular society. The most insular groups will be least responsive to feminist pressure. But since their isolation cannot be complete, they too can be expected to make concessions, although some only grudgingly.

In short, American society, the Jewish subsociety, and the relationship between them will determine the future of a social movement created by a small group of intellectuals and activists who sought to bridge the moral and cognitive gaps between conventional Judaism and modern American feminism.

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