

Feminism: Giving Birth to a New Judaism

By Martha Ackelsberg (Sh'ma 11/216, September 4, 1981)

Jewish feminists are discovering what many secular feminists have also found: equal access is not enough. Instead of devoting time and energy to gaining access to male roles, it is time to look more directly at Jewish tradition and at the ways in which it does (and does not) take seriously the lives and experiences of Jewish women. The re-creation of Judaism and Jewish life to which that examination leads can have a profound impact on both male and female Jews.

While there have always been those among Jewish feminists who focused their attention on a uniquely feminine spirituality, over the past ten years, the mainstream of Jewish feminism has addressed itself to the issue of gaining access for Jewish women to positions previously open only to males. Thus, early battles focused on counting women in the minyan or calling women for aliyot within Conservative congregations, training and ordaining women as rabbis, and having women assume positions of responsibility within the Jewish community.

Much progress has been made toward those goals, but much remains to be done. Reform and Reconstructionist rabbinical colleges are graduating more women rabbis each year and congregations are becoming less reluctant to hire those graduates. But the Jewish Theological Seminary still holds out. Women have gained rights to full membership in increasing numbers of synagogues throughout the country, and in many they hold positions of responsibility - even synagogue presidencies. While women are still not fully recognized within major Jewish communal organizations, at least the questions are being raised and pressure is on. Over time, perhaps more slowly than many of us would like - there has been, and will be, change.

Problems of Sexism in Judaism Go Deep

But many Jewish feminists are realizing that even achieving the goal of "equal access" in the ways described would not be enough. There is more to a feminist analysis of Jewish tradition and practice than simply a claim that women are prevented from doing what men do. In fact, as Cynthia Ozick recently suggested in a provocative article ("Notes Toward Finding the Right Question," *Lilith*, No. 6) problems of sexism within the Jewish tradition are much deeper. To open Jewish practice and communal membership fully to women will involve a transformation of tradition and practice considerably more profound than what we had heretofore envisioned. I want here to share with you the outlines of that new vision, as it developed from a four-day meeting of a small group of committed Jewish feminists struggling to understand "what a Judaism that takes women's experience seriously would look like."

The group - composed of fifteen women, some of whom are rabbinical students, some rabbis, some teachers, some theologians, some doctoral candidates in various Jewish studies fields, and some "activists" within the Jewish community - had one set of concerns in common. We are all Jewish feminists who came together out of a desire that our spiritual concerns be taken seriously within the Jewish community. Each has felt the pain of being feminist and Jewish in a Jewish community which does not fully recognize or appreciate the experience of modern women. We came together in hopes of ending the isolation each of us had felt. In the course of the four days, we all experienced even greater isolation - a recognition that our issues were not the same and our proposed solutions were, at times, quite disparate. But the experience also allowed us to understand that, in a more fundamental sense and despite our differences, we are not alone.

In particular, through our confrontation with issues of spirituality, we realized that if we are to strive for spiritual fulfillment, we must address those obstacles which prevent our full participation, as women, in the Jewish community. A closer look at those obstacles made it clear to all of us that the problems go considerably beyond equal access. They involve a re-thinking of at least four central elements of Jewish life: education, liturgy/ spirituality, family, and children.

Inequalities in Jewish Education

1. The lack of full equality between women and men in Judaism is readily apparent in what is taken to be the common core of Jewish education. Jewish feminists have long pointed out that while many teachers -- especially at the elementary levels -- are women, the majority of administrators of Jewish education are men. And faculties and students bodies become more male (and male-dominated) as one moves up the ladder of serious Jewish study. But the disparagement of women goes much deeper than the question of who occupies what role in the community - however important that question is. For it is still the case that the history we study in those classrooms is primarily the history of Jewish men. The experience and concerns of women are largely invisible - whether in the study of traditional Jewish texts or in the study of history. Jewish educators, and students of Jewish texts, must begin to ask new questions. What, for example, did women do while men were doing what Jewish historians have told us is "important"? What was the collective experience of Jewish women? How did this experience differ for individual women? At different points in Jewish history, what effect did the cultural indoctrination of women to seeing their primary function as that of home-maker and mother have on their labor force participation? What would history be like if seen through the eyes of women and ordered by values they define? In short, taking women and women's experience seriously means rethinking the way we study and teach both Jewish history and traditional Jewish texts. There is much we do not know; much more we have not even thought to ask.

Problems of Religious Expression

2. Issues of spirituality and religious expression are, perhaps, the most problematic; for religious expression, if it is to be powerful and honest, must derive from the experiences of those who pray. But experience of the divine is intensely personal. In addition, our ways of describing that experience are quite far from the anthropomorphized expressions of religious experience on which most of the traditional liturgy is based. Traditional Jewish liturgy addresses a patriarchal God, even while Judaism denies an anthropomorphic deity. The language used in that liturgy, the image of God expressed in it, and the relationship between God and the people of Israel conveyed through it are all predicated on sexist assumptions which we can no longer accept.

The problem, obviously, is not simply a "women's problem. " Some congregations - attempting to respond to the difficulties both women and men experience in praying to such a God - have attempted non-sexist translations of the traditional Hebrew prayers. But it is necessary to go beyond new translations, to examine the Hebrew liturgy itself and to develop new modes of religious expression which incorporate the femaleness of God and the experiences of female Jews. For some of us, that may mean attempting the mind-boggling task of writing new liturgy. As the proliferation of Rosh-Hodesh (new moon) celebrations attests, that route can be a fruitful one. For others, the strategy may be to develop the equivalent of kabbalistic kavanot (meditations said before or after some parts of the traditional liturgy) which imbue old words and symbols with dramatically new meanings. But if women - and men - whose consciousnesses are shaped by living in the modern world are to be able to pray, then the form and content of those prayers must begin to respond to the reality of our lives. Beyond what has already been said, that means we ought also to consider the development of a liturgy which can address a genderless, non-personal God.

3. Family structures provide another arena of current difficulty -- and of potential new strength. The lives of many of us differ from the Jewish norm of a traditional nuclear family. The Jewish family -- as the American family in general -- is in crisis. Large numbers of American Jews live their lives apart from such families. But the failure of the Jewish community to recognize that reality makes it difficult, if not impossible, for us to express our spirituality and to participate fully in Jewish community life. How long will our community deny that some people may choose to remain single or to live communally, and that these are valid long-term choices? How long will it be before the Jewish community will recognize the existence of gay Jews? We cannot continue to ignore people who choose to live differently from the norm. Both for the health and growth of the community and for the possibilities of fulfillment for its members, it is imperative that the Jewish community find ways to affirm and support those who are single, those who live communally, those who are single parents, and those who choose to love persons of their own sex.

Issues of Child Raising

4. Children are a concern for all of us. Judaism places a high value on children and their care. It is often stated that the most crucial commandment for Jews is p'ru ur'vu (be fruitful and multiply). But the American Jewish, community, which speaks often about the importance of giving birth to and raising Jewish children, has rarely recognized the provision of quality child care as a Jewish issue. Nor has it respected the choices of those who decide not to bear children.

Those who choose not to have children deserve the support and respect of the community for their decision. But they should not, as a consequence, be denied the opportunity to develop relationships with young children or to support those who have children.

Those who choose to have children - whether they live in traditional family structures or not - need the full support of the community in raising them. Jewish community centers and Jewish organizations should pioneer in providing day-care both for employees and for community children. They should also take a lead in developing flex-time schedules and shared jobs, and in making paternity leaves available to men. Jewish communities must start thinking about taking our women and our children seriously. If the raising of Jewish children is a communal priority, it must be recognized as a communal responsibility.

None of these issues, of course, is an issue only for women. Nor are they concerns that can be solved if only women address them. The agenda of equal access has not yet been achieved, and it must not be abandoned. There is much that both Jewish women and the Jewish community can gain by according women equal access to positions of responsibility and respect within that community.

But if women are truly to be included in the Jewish community - if that community is to be responsive to and reflective of the needs of all its members - a more fundamental transformation is required. We must move beyond "equal access" to a vision which incorporates the diversity of both women's and men's experience in the contemporary world. The task is a large one. It is our hope, in opening this dialogue, to engage the wider community in making this vision a reality.