

Women's & Men's Liberation:

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Woman Jews

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Judaism is a religion, a thought-system, a tradition, a history, a community, and a way of life, all intertwined. The very richness of the tapestry makes it difficult to define or pin down the Jewish belief and practice system. There are many voices, many periods of history, many disputes and agreements to disagree. The story of women in Judaism is similarly complicated, constantly in flux, and even more so today.

We should probably begin to consider the experience of women in Judaism with the reflection that Judaism is a religion and lifestyle with a built-in "mommy-track." Ever since the beginning of Judaism, and doubtless long before that, it has been assumed that a woman's life would be occupied with bearing and rearing children, providing for their economic and spiritual well-being. The Biblical poem "A Capable Woman" (sometimes called "A Woman of Valor," Prov. 31:11-21) shows an appreciation of women in this role and an assumption that women will fulfill it. In this poem, the woman of the house, wise and intelligent, is mistress of all the many economic tasks of women and an expert in buying and selling land. Because of her many capabilities, her husband praises her as he sits in the town gate. At this gate, the site of communal deliberations and legal judgment, the community made its decisions and adjudicated its disputes. The capable wife was not there—she was taking care of her household. It was her husband, together with the other men of the community, who engaged in these public affairs, and it was the strength and capability of the women that enabled their men to attend to such matters. This division of labor was the ideal of the scribes and scholars who wrote the Biblical Book of Proverbs at the beginning of the second Temple. Later, the founders of Rabbinic Judaism further refined a system that had different expectations for women and men.

In many religions, one might ask: what do social arrangements have to do

with religion? But in Judaism, society is at the core of religious thinking. The fundamental idea of Judaism is that there is one power, one will, supreme in the universe, and that this will, God, is in partnership with humanity to form a more perfect universe. The divine ruler demands our allegiance, fidelity, love, and commitment to the establishment of a righteous order. The way to do this is found in the Torah, the divine instruction, a term that refers both to the Pentateuch and the whole content of divinely inspired tradition. The Rabbis elaborated this central commitment into a series of *mitzvot*, "commandments," which spell out the parameters of proper behavior. There are two kinds of *mitzvot*: negative *mitzvot*, meaning proscriptions of impermissible behavior, and positive *mitzvot*, prescriptions of actions that one is required to do. These are part of the system of *halakhah*, religious law, which prescribes and regulates all the details of life and society.

In this system, all girls become obligated to the performance of *mitzvot* at the age of twelve (when a girl becomes a *bat mitzvah*, "daughter of the commandments"), and all boys at the age of thirteen (*bar mitzvah*). But the *mitzvot* to which they become obligated have not been identical for boys and girls. Everyone is equally obligated to observe the negative *mitzvot*, that is, to refrain from improper behavior. But there is a difference in the positive prescriptions. Females are particularly admonished to obey three commandments, sometimes known as the *hanah mitzvot* by the acronym of their names. The first is *hadlaqah*, the lighting of the Sabbath candles. The second is *niddah*, the observance of the system of menstrual taboos (avoidance of male contact during the first half of the cycle), and the third is *hallah*, a formal destruction of a small portion of dough in memory of the portion reserved for priests during the existence of the Temple. There are, of course, no penalties in Jewish religious law for failure to observe commandments. But these three have a special sanction: according to the Mishnah, failure to observe them can result in death in childbirth. Post-menopausal women are not exempted from these commandments. In fact, in the absence of women, a man is also expected to light Sabbath candles and, if baking bread, to destroy the *hallah* portion. But the three *mitzvot* are particularly singled out as the woman's *mitzvot*: taken together they define and sanctify the traditional woman's domain. Active in the household, she is to guard its purity by being scrupulous about menstrual laws, preserve its communal acceptability by not making the priest offering into food for the family, and make it into sacred space by ushering in the Sabbath through the lighting of the Sabbath candles. In doing these three, she perpetuates Judaism in the home and makes it possible to transmit it to the next generation.

At the same time, women have been exempt from commandments to which men are obligated. Of the 248 positive commandments, women have traditionally been exempted from fourteen (by other counts eighteen):

- recitation of the Shema (the central prayer of Judaism)
- the study and teaching of Torah (sacred law and lore)

- wearing of Tefillin on head and arm (2)
- wearing Tzitzit (Tallit)
- writing a Torah
- recitation of the priestly blessing by male priests
- counting of the Omer (the days between Passover and Shavuot)
- hearing the Shofar
- dwelling in the Sukkah (the festive booth of the fall holiday)
- taking and blessing the Lulav (a stalk made of four types of plants)
- procreation
- circumcision
- making one's wife happy during the first year of marriage.

These are very few *mitzvot*, but collectively they can make a big difference. In this system, the central *public* acts of Judaism (study and communal prayer), the visible symbols of the worship community (Tallit and Tefillin), and the central call to accept divine sovereignty (the blowing of the Shofar) all may legitimately take place without the required participation of women. For at least two millennia, the public life of the community was a life of men. Even the commandment to procreate is addressed only to men, despite the physical impossibility of male single-sex generation. There are many reasons for this, not the least of which was the fact that a woman could not be obligated to pursue a course of action that might very well end in her death. But essentially, the reason for exempting women from the law is not important. The message that the exemption of women from this commandment gives is the same as that conveyed by the other exemptions for women: the men who comprise the community have, or rather had, the obligation to perpetuate it.

The Rabbis of the Talmud, already faced with a group of commandments from which women were exempted, suggested as explanation that women were exempt from those commandments that are "time-bound" (i.e., that have to be done at a set time). Thus, the blessing after meals (which can be done any time after eating) is required of women, while the recitation of the Shema, which has to be done at set points of the day, is not. Of course, this rule about time-bound commandments does not really fit the pattern of exemptions: fringes on one's garment are not time-bound, yet women are exempt from wearing them; and nothing is more time-bound than lighting the Sabbath candles, which cannot be done after the Sabbath has begun. But this idea of "time-bound" commandments shows the understanding and assumptions of the Rabbis. Household work, particularly with children, was considered to be a woman's proper highest priority, and she was exempted, say the Rabbis, from anything that might interfere with this.

There were consequences to this exemption of women. Not being required to attend public prayer, they were not able to be counted as part of the quorum of

ten men who constitute the minimal public community necessary to have the special elements of public communal prayer. Not being obligated, they could not serve as the prayer-leader whose prayer fulfills the requirement of all who hear and respond to him. Not being obligated, their action in performing these ritual acts was considered an act of self-gratification rather than obedience to divine command, and there was dispute about whether women should recite the blessing that accompanied the ritual acts.

The Rabbinic system assumed that a woman would be occupied in the private domain, and this domain began to occupy her. She was increasingly defined as essentially and inherently "private." It is on this basis, still popular in many Orthodox circles, that women were defined as essentially private persons, so that no number of them can constitute an official public assembly, which requires ten men. The pattern of the optional *mitzvot* changed subtly. In home-centered rituals, such as counting the Omer, taking the Lulav, and eating in the Sukkah, women gradually became participants in such numbers that Halakhic authorities began to consider that women—as a group—had obligated themselves. Thus the Magen Avraham, a Halakhic authority of the seventeenth century, argued that women had become obligated to counting the Omer, and others extended the argument to the Sukkot rituals (eating in the Sukkah, taking Eitrog and Lulav). On the other hand, in public rituals the direction of change went in the opposite direction. In the case of study, which in Judaism is a central *devotional* exercise and not only an intellectual pursuit, the exemption of women developed into a presumption that women would not study, and then into a cultural pattern in which women were not taught. Public worship followed a similar pattern, with women increasingly shunted out of visible participation in the community. Even the obligation to light Hanukkah candles underwent change. Women had been obligated to do this, but the public/private distinction became so important that this *mitzvah*, which was a *public* demonstration of the Hanukkah deliverance (and was moreover done outdoors until recently), became performed by men *for* the women.

The absence of women from the public life of the community was intensified by rules of segregation and "modesty" that developed in the first few hundred years of the Common Era. Among these was the Mehitzah, the physical barrier between men and women as they pray. By the fourth century, it seems, women were physically separated from men by being in balconies or behind curtains. The family did not pray together. The men congregated near where they could participate in the action (which was all being performed by men); the women were out of sight. All the men could see were other men. This system of separation, probably borrowed from the Greco-Roman world, was explained and justified on the principle that women were a sexual distraction that would take men's minds off prayer. As women became more private, as men had less opportunity to interact with women other than their wives, they thought of these other women primarily as sex objects, and the fear of sexual temptation loomed ever larger. The men of Israel told stories about how the sight of a beautiful

woman could cause men to perform almost superhuman feats in their drive toward immorality. They developed laws to guard against opportunities for sexual misconduct, chief among them the Mishnaic law of *yihud*, which prohibits a man and a woman from being alone together. They protected themselves from lustful thoughts by decreeing that women should be dressed "modestly" (covered from elbow to toe), that their hair should be covered, and that their voices should not be heard. The women of Israel, out in public on their tasks and labors, should not attract attention: the goal of "modesty" regulations is the invisibility of women.

The community of Israel did not ignore women, nor consider them less than Jews, but it also did not see them as independent members of the community. All the active members of the public life of the Jewish community in synagogue and school were men. Each man, in turn, represented his household, his wife and children. In this way, the male of the household mediated the message of the community, the learning and heritage, to his family. His family, in turn (particularly his wife), encouraged his active participation in this public devotional life and did everything possible to enable the man to participate. The women had become "other," a separate group that intersected with the public Jewish community. They were the "wives and daughters of Israel" rather than woman Jews. The women enabled the men to live their lives in the divine presence and were praised and honored for this role. Judaism evolved through the millennia of our era into a sort of "benevolent patriarchy" a community of God-centered men prescribing respect and affection for the women who provided them with their opportunities of divine service.

Women have long found security and fulfillment in this type of a system, but it is archaic and maladaptive to contemporary ideas of the proper relationship between the sexes and the real identity of women. It also lends itself to abuse. If the husband is the head of the household, responsible to the community for maintaining it, the well-being of its members depends on the goodwill of the man and, failing that, the strength of communal persuasion. But if this should fail, what can a woman do? In traditional Judaism, the right to create and dissolve a marriage was the husband's. If the woman was dissatisfied in her relationship, she had to depend on the community's ability to persuade her husband to grant her a formal divorce. When community control was weak (as it is today), this could lead to husbands permanently shackling their wives, creating *agunot*, "anchored" women who were no longer living with their husbands but were not free to marry anyone else. Any system in which the women are individual satellites to the men who comprise the community contains within it vast potential for abuse.

WHY, THEN, AM I A JEW?

In truth, I have no real choice. There is no "me" that is not a Jewish "me," no "I" to stand outside the people and choose to belong or not to belong to the

faith. When I was about thirteen, one of my teachers told me a story. He had just been to a celebration of Martin Buber's eightieth birthday at the Ethical Culture Society. As he told the story (the scholar in me knows that I have no independent verification), a guest speaker praised Buber, claiming that he was neither Jew nor Christian, but the "universal man." This was high praise indeed at the Ethical Culture society, and everybody was full of good cheer and fellow feeling. Except Buber. When he arose in response, he slammed his hand down on the lectern and said "I am not a universal man. I am a Jew. I feel it in my blood and in my bones: I stood at Sinai." That story has stayed in my memory, for Buber expressed something deep in the soul of many Jews—a sense of eternity and community, a deep experience of linkage and history.

I am not naive. A twentieth-century scholar, I know how I came to feel this way. Every year at Passover I remember the primal event of Judaism, the exodus from Egypt. Every year I read in the Haggadah, the liturgy recited at the Passover feast, that "in every generation a person must look at him/herself as if she came out of Egypt." Throughout the year, the signposts of the seasons carry me once more into my Jewish identity. In June, at Shavuot (Pentecost), the start of summer brings the revelation and the coming of the Law; in September-October, at Sukkot, the fragile hut in which I eat the season's harvest of fruits and vegetables recalls the desert journey of the Hebrews to the Promised Land. I sit and taste the food, and invite Jews from past generations to come to share this memory with me. In the spring, at Passover, I celebrate freedom, beginnings, and rebirth. To these three harvests of history, the Jewish calendar adds remembrances of good times (Purim) and bad (Tisha b'Av), momentous happenings (Hannukah) and small (Fast of Gedaliah). Even in my lifetime, more days have been added—days to commemorate the horror (Holocaust day, Memorial day) and the glory (Israel Independence day) of Jews in our times. In the passing of the present, Jews see their past; in the marking of days we meet our history.

To these annual events, shared by (I hope) most Jews, I add the events of my own life. When I was a very little girl, my father took me to a rally. There I listened to the vote at the UN that established the state of Israel, and then I rose with a huge crowd to sing the Hatikvah, the song of national Jewish identity. I am not sure where that really was, perhaps at Madison Square Garden, perhaps at Yankee Stadium. I was four years old at the time, and my memory of this event, my first real memory, is more mythic than historical.

Israel, Jews, the Holocaust—all were an important part of my life. Zionist youth groups and summer camps, years in Israel, Hebrew songs, Hebrew dances, all enhanced my identification with Israel and with the Jewish people. They did not make me an Israeli. I am an American, and like other Jews in America I mark my years in two calendars, journeying also through the American civic remembrances by which our nation of immigrants transforms itself into a people. Every Thanksgiving, we rehearse the arrival of the pilgrims and retell the stories of Jamestown; every Fourth of July we are reminded of the Revolutionary War, of independence, freedom, and the ideals of our founders. We reinforce these

journeys through time with visits to Philadelphia, Boston, Williamsburg, Valley Forge, Gettysburg, and our many other national monuments and historical sites. Holidays, pilgrimages, and our studies in school all help us internalize our history until it becomes a part of us, inseparable from our hopes and values. In the communal memory of past events we realize our identities as Jews and as Americans.

The heritage of Jewish history and modern Jewish events provides a deep sense of community and a rich feeling of connectedness to past and present. But this is only a small fraction of Judaism. I have always felt somewhat ill-at-ease with the same Buber story that had such an impact on me. When I first heard the tale in my teens, I wanted to change Buber's answer. "Why," I responded (in the innocent effrontery of adolescence), "didn't he say 'I stand at Sinai' "? I still feel the need for this philosophico-grammatical change. The synagogue in which I grew up had a verse inscribed in Hebrew above the holy ark: *da lifney mee atah omed*, "know before whom you stand!" This ark, the cabinet in which the Holy Torah scrolls are kept, is the focal point of Synagogue architecture. Throughout the service, as I looked at it, I was reminded of the presence of One I could not see. The ark, the Torah, and this verse all directed me beyond myself, even beyond the community in which I stood, to an eternity of time, space, and will.

This transcendent message is reinforced every year with great impact on the solemn High Holy days of September. In the majesty of Rosh Hashanah, the year begins anew with a joyous proclamation of creation and the sovereign authority of the Creator. God sits on the universal throne. Then, in the days that follow, we focus on us humans, on our deeds and misdeeds and the sense of responsibility that they engender. These "days of penitence" culminate in the solemn day of Yom Kippur, a day of fasting, penitence, and hope. These solemn High Holy days, the "Days of Awe," reinforce our sense of transhuman nexus in our lives. They speak of our connectedness and obligations to each other, to the universe, and to God. This, the central message of Judaism, has become part of my own essence.

For all these reasons, I am a Jew and always will be. Ecumenical modern American that I am, I know that there are many religions, that they all strive to give their believers a sense of belonging, responsibility, and fervor. I believe with fervor and conviction that there are many paths for the human quest. But as for me, I am a Jew. I can do no other, nor would I want to.

This being a Jew is a matter of destiny, education, and identification. Nevertheless, above all, it is also a matter of choice. The forces that make us a Jew do not *compel* us to be so. If Judaism were a misogynist religion, I could not continue to choose to participate. A Jew I might remain, by tradition and upbringing, but a Jew in rebellion or, even worse, a Jew in silence and solitude, alienated from the tradition and the community that give energy to the Jewish spirit. Instead, I study and learn (which are Jewish devotional exercises), I train students to be Rabbis, I send my children to Jewish day schools so that they too

can learn to learn, and I not only belong to a synagogue, I go regularly to pray in community. To me there is no doubt that Judaism provides a home for my spirit, a faith that allows me to grow and contribute.

As a woman, I know that the wellspring of Judaism is not in conflict between my love of Judaism and my woman-ness. The classical Rabbinic tradition of women's separateness is foreign to my life and beliefs, and the systematic exclusion of women from the men's club of prayer and learning is a history to be mourned. Whenever I approach the ancient texts that heralded the domestication of women, I feel again the same anger that I felt when I first realized that I could never have lived my life of involvement with Jewish learning had I been born before my time. But the rage recedes before the realization that the past can be laid to rest. Rage seems to me only valuable as an incentive to change, so that one develops the determination to lead the type of vigorously Jewish and feminist life that will keep at least some groups of Judaism open and receptive to all their members. We need to grieve about the past, and, having grieved, set aside our grief in order to create a new order. This is easier to do in Judaism than in some other religions, for even though Judaism has been totally androcentric in its focus, it has not been anti-woman. There have been misogynist statements from time to time, but they are neither consistent nor dominant in the tradition. In many respects, Jewish tradition exploited women, but it did not malign them. The result has been that Jewish women are famously strong-willed and proud. The women of Israel never were Victorian maidens. The Rabbis knew that they were strong, assertive mistresses of their households, and they encouraged this, proclaiming that the woman was queen in her household and expecting her to be active in pursuit of her family's aims. The women of Israel were responsible for the moral character of the household, the religious home observances, and the well-being of family members. Their responsibilities often brought them into what we normally consider the "public" domain, not only physically into public space but actively as wage earners and businesswomen. Judaism has always had an often-expressed appreciation for women in their place. This approval, of course, was conditional on their staying in their place, and was an important incentive to women to accept their lot and the approval that went with it. Nevertheless, Judaism did not tell women that they were inferior, or evil. With the explicit approval of the men, the women were openly capable.

There is another reason for the strength of Jewish women. Beyond all the patriarchal concerns and attitudes, there has always been another, deeper message of Judaism, sometimes not acknowledged, but always there. Beyond the Talmud lies the Bible, always proclaimed the most sacred of all texts, held to be divinely originated and divinely inspired, celebrated and studied liturgically as part of sacred service. And the Bible simply does not depict women as sex objects, or weak, or reticent. Of course, the Bible, written for its time, never imagines egalitarianism. The Bible inherited a social structure that we could call "hierarchical" or "patriarchal," complete with inequities between rich and poor,

slave and free, ruler and ruled, men and women, and never questioned the fundamental premises underlying such social divisions. Some of these divisions, indeed, have never been eradicated. Slavery was abolished in Jewish law in Rabbinic times, and in Western culture only in our recent past. Male-female distinctions are disappearing only today, painfully, in fits and starts. And the poor are still very much with us, with the inequalities between rich and poor in America growing enormously in our own lifetime. Probably, none of these divisions could have been eradicated in Biblical Israel. Certainly there could have been no gender egalitarianism. At a time when half of all women could expect to die in childbirth, when it took multiple pregnancies and births to produce one child who would survive past the age of five, and when women rarely lived past thirty, and men not much longer—how could egalitarianism or unisex lifestyles be conducive to survival?

Biblical Israel never questioned the legal subordination of women to men. But the way that Israel *justified* its skewed social order has had important ramifications for the way Judaism looks upon women. The social order is legitimated by divine fiat (Gen. 3): husbands are to be dominant over their wives. This divine prescription is really a description of historical reality. Attributing this social order to God doesn't open the door for much argument or dissent, but it also removes the onus from women for their social position. Nowhere in the Bible are women considered inferior, less wise, less moral, or in need of keepers. They have the life they lead because God announced that it would be so—a theistic way of saying "it is so because it is so." Social subordination is not a reflection of a lesser character. In fact, the Biblical portrayal of women shows them to be much the same as men. Neither sexy nor weak, they have the same goals as the rest of Israel, and pursue them with the same strategies and powers as the out-of-power men who formed the bulk of the population.¹ There are no characteristics that we can call "feminine" in the Bible that men do not also share, no attributes of "masculinity" not manifested by women.

The metaphysics of gender unity finds expression in the creation stories. In Genesis 2, after God creates the earthling (Adam), Adam is lonely. God sets out to create other creatures to accompany Adam. But even in his earliest, most primitive naivete, Adam can not find suitable companionship in cows or chickens. So God creates "woman" and "man."² The significance of this story becomes apparent when we compare it to two tales from the Babylonians. In the beginning of the Gilgamesh Epic, Gilgamesh is oppressing his city and the gods realize that his arrogance results from having no peer. They rectify the situation by having the mother goddess create a new creature who can be a counterpart to Gilgamesh, and she creates Enkidu—another male. When the two meet, they recognize their suitability to each other and become close companions. The second tale, the Agushaya hymn, has a similar plot-line. Ishtar, most ferocious and "virile" of the goddesses, is terrifying to the gods. The god Enki realizes that she needs a companion to occupy her attention and creates Saltu—another ferocious female goddess. In these Babylonian stories, the closest bonding pos-

sible is between male-male and female-female. By contrast, in the Bible, the suitable companion for a male is a female and the male-female bond is proclaimed as the closest possible connection between humans: "therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and they shall become as one flesh."

The other story of the creation of human beings also delivers the same message of mutuality and equality between men and women. In Genesis 1, on the sixth day, God created humanity in the image of the divine, "male and female created he them." Once again, the implication is that male and female, both in the image of the divine, are essentially similar to each other and that all differences are secondary to this congruence. The separate creation of Pandora in Greek mythology, and the Greek concept of the "race of women" that it illustrates, are a sharp contrast to this Biblical message of homogeneity. Just as there is no plurality of divine powers in Judaism, so, in reflection, there is no multiplication of different types of humanity. In Genesis 2, one human being was created, and when the solitude proved too lonely, the one was divided, with the second coming directly out of the first. In Genesis 1, both humans were created at once, but they were each created in the image of the one God.

The Bible sends a double message, for alongside these creation stories is the divine fiat that men will rule their wives. Further reading of the Bible shows that the Court and the Temple (though not prophecy) were in the hands of men. But in the household, there is no echo of the divine fiat. Where is the woman who does what her husband or father says simply because he tells her to do so? In Genesis, in the stories of the matriarchs, the husbands have the right to control the succession. But women are not automatically assumed to be willing to follow their husbands and fathers in all their decisions. They are not obligated to move away from their home. Before she is sent off to marry Isaac, Rebekkah is asked if she will move to Israel (Gen. 34:57-58). Even Rachel and Leah, already married, must be asked if they are willing to move with their husband Jacob (Gen. 31:4-13). Nor are the matriarchs assumed to acquiesce in their husband's choices of heirs: Sarah persuades her husband to eliminate Isaac's rival (Gen. 21:8-14); Rebekkah tricks her husband into awarding his inheritance blessing to Jacob (Gen. 27).

The law codes and the narratives of Samuel and Kings sometimes show different pictures of the position of women. The law codes tell us that a husband can immediately annul a wife's vow if he overhears it, presumably because he controls the goods that she is vowing to present to God. But women such as the great (wealthy) woman of Shunem do not consult their husband before deciding to bestow gifts or offer hospitality (2 Kings 4-8). In fact, Biblical narratives abound in strong decisive women who act for the benefit of Israel: from Deborah and Jael through Abigail, the great woman of Shunem, and the Wise Women of Abel and of Tekoa, the women of Israel act with strength and decisiveness. Throughout the millennia of Jewish history, the power of these narratives has gripped the Jewish imagination and helped form its expectations of human behavior.

The impact of these stories was particularly strong on Jewish women precisely because of the Rabbinic exclusion of women from serious study. While the men were studying the Talmud, with its worry about sexual temptation and its determination to create a pure and purely male system, the women were learning the Bible stories, with their subliminally revolutionary message that women are not sex objects, victims, or submissive and meek. Jewish women have had other strong role models: from the Talmudic period came Beruriah the scholar, wife of Rabbi Meir, whose learning was famed and respected, and Rachel, the self-sacrificing wife of Rabbi Akiba, who worked to send him to school; from later in history came figures of wealth and charity such as Donna Gracia Mendes and the Americans Rebecca Gratz and Henrietta Szold. Different stories have had their greatest impact at different periods. The story of Rachel, Akiba's wife, was particularly important when scholarship could only exist when some women were willing to shoulder both household and economic burdens; the story of Beruriah had a renaissance when women themselves were encouraged to study. But in all the stories, women were glorified for strength and determination, perseverance and achievement. With these models in mind, women were able to live under the Halakhah (the legal system that defined everything, including the proper patriarchal relations between the sexes) without being effaced by it.

Religions are never static: they always entail process and growth. Every generation learns from its past and adapts to its present. Consciously or unconsciously, each community chooses anew the foundation message of the faith and, in so doing, modifies it so that it can continue to live. With very few exceptions, religions cannot live only in the past: they must respond to the human ideas and needs of each present generation. There are differences between Biblical and Rabbinic Judaism. The world changed, and the religion, always faithful to its core, changed in response to new needs and new ideas. From the standpoint of today—in other words, according to the needs and ideas of the late twentieth century—some of these changes were "advances": the abolition of animal sacrifice, the increased emphasis on interior values, the abandonment of war as a means of expression or persuasion. Other changes aren't as appealing to us, particularly the establishment of separate spheres for men and women and the reinforcement of this separation by rules of "modesty" (invisibility). This separation is not Biblical: it is deeply influenced by Greek ideas about categorical differences and about the dangers of sexual attraction. It is also part of the great emphasis on the household by a society that had lost its institutions of Temple and Palace.

But the changes introduced by the Rabbis were not irrevocable. They were adaptive to their own situation, and helped ensure the people's survival then and throughout the medieval period, but they have no place in a postindustrial society. Judaism has changed and will continue to change on all sociological issues. The modern revolution concerning women has been underway a long time, long before we were actually aware of its magnitude. Women began to be educated seriously in Jewish studies a hundred years ago, in response to the new reality

created by the industrial revolution in which there were women of leisure, ready to be educated and being educated only in non-Jewish matters. Some voted with their feet, opting to abandon the Jewish lifestyle and community. Others found that they had nothing in common with their Jewish-educated husbands, leading to disrupted home relationships. To ensure the continuation of the Jewish family, a leading and brave Halakhic authority, the Hatam Sofer, decreed that in the modern world women needed to be educated in Torah, thus paving the way for the establishment of the first religious schools for girls. The education of women in Judaism had great consequences, for it meant that they would no longer be quite as dependent on traditional male interpretations of the traditional sources. Another major change happened without any particular legal decision or authority. Jews in America in the Conservative movement began to pray with "mixed seating": men and women sat together, there was no women's section and no *mehitzah* barrier. And somehow services didn't become orgiastic, men didn't abandon fervor for frivolity. Slowly, mixed seating had a profound psychological effect: as the worshippers looked around at the congregation with which they were praying, they saw both men and women. The message delivered subliminally by an unsegregated congregation is that the Community of Israel is both men and women.

These new directions have turned into a fundamental sea-change in Jewish thinking and practice. I feel that I, and many other women still fairly young, have witnessed a revolution. I had my own small part to play in this revolution. I was the first woman undergraduate at the Jewish Theological Seminary permitted to be a Talmud major and take part in the Talmud major seminar. It seems incredible to believe that there was a time when a woman's registering for a class in Talmud was a major achievement. As with most other barriers, once breached, it was almost as if it had never existed. There were soon several women studying Talmud seriously, a woman graduate student was admitted to the seminar of the grand master of Talmud, and there were women Talmud Ph.D.'s. Of course, we say now: the study of Talmud, like any study, is not the property of any one gender! How could anyone ever have thought that women could be excluded from *study*? And yet, they were—until our generation.

Change has come very rapidly. In the early 1970s, as the first Reform and Reconstructionist women Rabbis were being ordained, a group of women called "Ezrat Nashim" (Women's Section) presented a list of demands to the Rabbinical Assembly of the Conservative movement. They expressed their extreme discomfiture that they, highly educated and knowledgeable in Jewish texts, liturgy, and practice, should not be able to lead services and even to attend as full members of the prayer community. There could be no prayer community without ten men—no matter how many knowledgeable and devout women were sitting there. They could not be honored with a blessing over the Torah, while a man who set foot in a synagogue once in a decade and had to mumble the blessings from an English transliteration could be so honored. They could not read liturgically from the Torah that they loved, they could not represent in song the

prayer community they felt such a part of. Some Conservative Jews laughed at them, not even comprehending the pain out of which they spoke. But the Conservative Rabbis listened, and less than twenty years later, the agenda of Ezrat Nashim has been completely fulfilled. Women are full members of congregations, they receive equal honors with men, and they can be Rabbis and Cantors.

From derision to fulfillment in twenty short years! There was no way of predicting how quickly change could take place. Those of us who were raised before the change sometimes have to play "catch-up" with our own children. I had my religious *Bat Mitzvah* celebration when I was thirty (rather than 12–13), when I learned for the first time how to chant the Haftorah, the reading from the Prophets sung liturgically. I am still learning liturgical skills that my daughter, not yet *Bat Mitzvah*, has already mastered. She knows chants that I am now learning, and assumes that she will master them all. She has been raised to expect to pray and lead prayers, and sometimes finds virtue in doing as little, rather than as much, as she can get away with. Her very nonchalance teaches me how peacefully she can follow the paths carved by revolution.

The task is not yet finished, the sexes are not completely equal; this very rapid revolution has its turmoils. The past is not yet past. Orthodoxy still teaches an extremely gender-segregated lifestyle and religious practice, and declares all change in the other branches of Judaism to be fundamentally non-Jewish. The other branches are evolving, but even in non-Orthodox circles there are many who do not accept and agree to change. Jewish life today is a checkerboard of egalitarian and nonegalitarian practices. In Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism, there is unanimity; in Conservative Judaism, there is division. Officially, the movement, committed to Ha'akha, has not yet found a Halakhic argument to allow women to serve as witnesses. But the clear majority of the Conservative movement appears headed for complete egalitarianism between the sexes. A small group bands together to encourage each other to resist this change, talks of schism, and establishes its own women-exclusionary seminary. Obstructionist as they are, the dissenting reactionary voices are fighting a rear-guard action. Their objections are vestigial elements of the old separatist system. For the majority of Jews in America, the last two decades have witnessed a major transformation in the thinking and practice of liberal Judaism.

Even the Orthodox may change, but in Orthodox circles change is in its infancy. Officially, many elements of Orthodoxy deny that change is possible. Still others require that change always be dictated from above. Yet there have been major changes. Women are educated in the Orthodox community, though separately from the men and not to the same level of Talmudic knowledge. Women do not lead prayers, but they are not silenced from joining in the singing of Sabbath songs. And there are women actively working and agitating for change. Voices such as Arlene Agus,¹ Blu Greenberg,⁴ Rivka Haut,³ and Norma Josephs⁶ express the sentiments of many modern Orthodox women, committed to Orthodoxy but anxious for fuller female participation. The many women's prayer groups and the National Women's Tefillah (prayer) Network attest to the

active desire of women to participate in a community of worshippers. The developing Orthodox women's religious expression is different from women's experiences in the other branches of Judaism, for among the Orthodox the newly developing public ritual life for women is a parallel community, separate from the male but giving public expression to women's devotion and spirituality.

The Orthodox movement has not yet made peace with the idea that women want to be part of a public devotional community. There are Rabbis vigorously opposed to the women's prayer groups in the United States, Rabbinic leaders who argue vociferously that women need to remain private and individual in their devotions. This year, the newspapers have been full of reports of the struggles of progressive women (Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox women together) to achieve the simple right of being allowed to gather at the Western Wall in Jerusalem and be a congregation of women, praying together at the site of the ancient Jewish Temple. Their dignity has been stripped, they have been insulted and physically mauled. Their very presence as an independent congregation of Jews, proudly praying together without the mediation of men, has sent shock waves through groups that are used to thinking of the community of Israel as an assemblage of *men*, each with his mother, wife, and daughters.

The drama at the Western Wall is the result of a major change. Not because women came together, but because they continue to do so. Once, I too was attacked at the Wall. I had gone there to pray as soon as I arrived in the country. I had worn my most modest outfit: pants with a full dress over them, somewhat in the Yemenite fashion. The dress was high-necked and long-sleeved, but it was eyelet, fully lined except for the sleeves. If you stood very close and looked very hard, you could see pinpoints of arm flesh through the eyes of the fabric. As I stood praying silently, I suddenly felt blows around my head and shoulders. Behind me there was a woman, beating me with a pocketbook and yelling at me that I was shamefully immodest, and insulting to the holy place and its worshippers. I told her to go away and I think she did—but I never wore that dress to the Wall again. I conformed to her norms, concerned that I insult her traditions. Ultimately, I gave up on the Wall, going rarely and reluctantly, having internalized the sense that my ways were foreign to the Wall, a modern intrusion. No more. The women at the Wall today have announced by their persistence that the old strictures against women's public being are simply *wrong*. They are not more traditional, certainly not in the sense of being authentic. They are simply wrong, and the women creating new patterns stand more genuinely in the ongoing tradition of Judaism.

Other legal barriers to women's equality and self-determination have no place in Judaism. The Orthodox community is agonizing over how to prevent the abuse of women under a legal system that holds that a woman is not free until her husband grants her a divorce. *Agunot* (anchored women) are multiplying as modern mobility enables husbands to move away, as husbands blackmail wives

out of large sums of money before they agree to grant the bill of divorce.⁷ Tens of thousands of Orthodox women live shackled by this regulation, unable to marry again. This is an ethical disaster, never intended by the Rabbis. It is a fossil of an age in which Rabbinic authority and community pressure made sure that men properly freed their wives. But the modern abuse of the ancient law shows the inherent danger and ethical error of leaving a woman's future in the hands of her husband. In Reform Jewry, there is no religious bill of divorce; in Reconstructionism, either the husband or the wife can apply to have the divorce issued. Conservative Judaism has solved the problem by reinstating the ancient system of annulment: if the estranged husband refuses to free his wife, a Rabbinic court can free the woman by annulling the marriage. This action frees women whose husbands simply leave or obtain a civil divorce, and the existence of this possibility eliminates threats and blackmail. Halakhic experts, Conservative and Orthodox, have shown the antiquity and authority of annulment. But the Orthodox community has not adopted it, probably because of the threat it poses to male autonomy.

Orthodoxy attempts to assert the dominance and centrality of males. But it has nothing to do with me. The Orthodox voice is not the voice of ancient tradition; it is one voice among the many interpreters of Judaism today. There are many paths in Jerusalem. My own is egalitarian and traditional in liturgy and observance. Other people, including Orthodox women, may opt for the Orthodox system, may accept it and support it. Patriarchy offers security, rigid rules offer a conviction of righteousness. Patriarchal Orthodox Judaism, male-centered but not misogynist, offers the women who accept the system a sense of appreciation and purpose. This is not my way, and it has no authority over me. Patriarchy is not my ideology and, moreover, any view of Judaism that freezes tradition at a particular point in the past seems to me misguided and in some cases idolatrous. As a pluralist, I cannot object to Orthodoxy. However, I do not have to justify myself before it. It lays no claims on my attentions or emotions, for Orthodox Judaism is one form of modern Judaism. It does not embody the ancient Jewish tradition any more than any other branch of Judaism does. Orthodoxy, too, has developed in response both to external circumstance and its own internal dynamics. At every point of change, there were choices that were made. I see no reason to demand absolute allegiance to early nineteenth-century versions of Judaism when Judaism continues to evolve, and I feel no need to consider these early nineteenth-century formats as normative in any way.

The barriers to women's participation are coming down in the rest of Jewry. But anti-woman feelings find other expression. Threatened by the advances and achievements of women in the world, and denied the bastion of the synagogue as a "men's club," anti-woman sentiment finds its expression in cruel humor, in the proliferation of "JAP" (Jewish American Princess) jokes, crudely misogynist and anti-Semitic. This development is sad, and needs to be combatted. It erodes women's self-esteem and heightens divisions between women. It rein-

forces sexual and ethnic stereotypes and can cause estrangement between Jewish men and women. But in the long run, it is a rear-guard reaction and cannot stop the tides of change.

In the long history of Judaism, on practically any point at issue, there were many voices eager to speak and be heard, many opinions, equally learned, based on antiquity, faith, and love of God. That is what makes Judaism so exciting. There are many voices today, an array of opinions both bewildering and inspiring. That too is exciting. And now, many of these voices are female. A whole new dimension of experience is being brought to the ancient tradition. Women's lives, women's needs, are heard. Women have always had their own *aggadah* (philosophy, interpretation, folklore, customs), but it was separate, women's own, superceded by the high tradition of Jewish learning with which it never interacted. Now the dialogue has been opened. Now that women speak the language of learning and have access to ritual and ministry, they are offering their insights to everyone: feminist interpretation of the Bible, new liturgy without hierarchical dualism, changing images of God, new liturgy for life cycles, inclusive theology and liturgy, theology of birth and nurture. Some new developments:

Rosh Hodesh—there was an ancient tradition that on Rosh Hodesh (the beginning of each month), women refrained from certain work (particularly washing and sewing) and gathered together for a celebration. This custom has been revived as a woman's occasion, when women come together for fellowship, devising their own creative rituals to mark the year.

Ministry—as more women enter the clergy, trends already present have been intensified. The Rabbinate is becoming ever less authoritarian and more pastoral, ministering to the needs and addressing the spiritual desires of the people.

Blessings—In traditional Judaism, the events of the day—eating, drinking, washing, seeing nature, studying—have all been sanctified by the saying of a blessing, recalling the presence of God, and focusing attention on the transhuman in the midst of the mundane. New forms of these blessings are being written by Marcia Falk and others, forms that stress the activity of humanity and the immanence of God.

Theology—the central ideas and institutions are being reexamined in the light of what they mean to an inclusive community. A feminist Jewish theology is emerging, particularly in the works of Judith Plaskow.⁸

Scholarship—the presence of women in Judaic studies is opening up new areas of research and providing new perspectives on ancient traditions. There are now so many women in Jewish Studies that it would be unfair to try to enumerate them all. Ancient Near Eastern scholars, Biblical scholars, ancient and modern historians, anthropologists, and sociologists are both studying Jewish women and providing women's perspectives on all scholarly issues.

Life Cycle—Jewish women have expressed the need to sanctify the biological events of life, and there has been a profusion of prayers, rituals, and poems for the naming of a daughter, for puberty, menstruation, marriage, birth, and menopause. My own work on

"Motherprayer"⁹ seeks to expand traditional insight and vocabulary to encompass a theology of pregnancy and birth.

Song—spirituality is joined to creativity. Women's voices, long silent from the religious arena by law and custom, are now being heard. The songbook of Geela Reezel Raphael,¹⁰ the liturgical music of Shefa Pelicrow (both students at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College), and the liturgical music of Debbie Freedman are creating a new form of spiritual music, centered in liturgy and expressing modern spirituality.

There are many more contributions of women to Midrash, to scholarship, liturgy, and thought. The list has grown too great to enumerate, and only random names come to mind. There have always been women thinkers; now their offerings enter the mainstream of Judaism and enrich the ancient traditions. Indeed, with all the difficulties and turmoil, it is an exciting time to be a Jew.

NOTES

1. For a detailed presentation of the image of women in the Bible, see my *In the Wake of the Goddesses* (New York: Free Press, forthcoming).
2. It has been noted, and deserves to be noted again, that Adam is not called *ish*, "man," until after the woman is created.
3. Arlene Agus, "This Month is for You," in Elizabeth Koltun, ed., *The Jewish Woman: A New Perspective* (New York: Schocken, 1976), 84-93.
4. See Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981).
5. Rivka Haut is head of the Jewish Women's National Tefillah Network.
6. Norma Josephs, who is Professor of Judaism at Concordia University, Montreal, is well known as a lecturer in Orthodox women's circles and currently working on a study of the women-related response of Reb. Moshe Feinstein.
7. There is a difference in the status of men and women who are civilly, but not religiously, divorced. A man can apply for permission to take a second wife; and even if he does not do so, any children born of his subsequent unions will be fully legitimate. A woman may not, and future children of a woman who has not received a proper religious divorce are considered *mamzerim*, bastards, and are not permitted to marry Jews. Because of this difference, men have leverage over women and can subject them to blackmail.
8. See most recently Judith Plaskow, *Standing at Sinai* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).
9. Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, *Motherprayer: Readings toward a Theology of Birth*. Forthcoming 1992.
10. Sponsored by the Melton Foundation.