

Religious Institutions and  
Women's Leadership

*New Roles Inside the Mainstream*

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# Faithful Daughters and Ultimate Rebels: The First Class of Conservative Jewish Women Rabbis

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1984, amid conflict and apprehension, the faculty of the Conservative Judaism's Jewish Theological Seminary opened its gates to admit eighteen women for rabbinical training. Each of these chosen women could be described as the ultimate faithful Jewish daughter, loving the tradition, joyously participating to the extent women could, and longing for greater involvement and more intense learning. Yet many must also be described as dissenting rebels, claiming their inclusion within the central requirements of male status in Judaism—ritual, study, and law. They wanted to participate fully in public prayer, to take on the responsibility to perform the commandments, and to study religious legal texts. They chose to root themselves as fully obligated adults within the prescribed and historical rituals and laws, and to become rabbis.

These Conservative Jewish women struggled to reconstruct a more enabling vision of themselves, their traditions, and their possibilities for spiritual leadership. Yet even while striving to achieve basic changes in the interpretation of the religious law and its view of women, they pledged themselves and their life's work to observing and transmitting that system of law. Each entered the seminary committed to the religious law and its commandments, yet many knew themselves as outsiders who wrestled with a rigid tradition and a static revelation. This chapter is based on information gathered during intensive interviews with fifteen women, members of the first class of women admitted for rabbinical training in the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in 1984.

To understand the personal and political tightrope walked by these women one needs a synopsis of the system of Jewish law, the *halakhah*, and a brief outline of the origins of Conservative Judaism in the United States.

#### HALAKHIC MODIFICATIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS

The shorthand definition of the word *halakhah* is usually given as the body of religious laws, but this is inadequate. The literal meaning is "the path," a total way of living that has defined, guarded, guided, and legislated what it means to live a Jewish life across thousands of years of history in every town where Jews have lived. Obeying the *halakhah* meant sanctifying and transforming every act of behavior, with the goal of bringing about the perfection of the world, the messianic age. For traditional Jews, the entire system of *halakhah* is divine revelation, the everlasting covenant with the Creator; therefore, the process by which any modification is considered becomes most critical in sustaining the entire system.

It is this legal code which has defined and perpetuated the role of women within the community, specifically excluding women's input in its content or its methodology for analyzing change. A masculine hegemony legislated women as not eligible to acquire the knowledge of texts which is a necessary requirement for credentialing. Although there are no written qualifications for determining who merits the status of legal interpreter or *posek*, an Orthodox scholar has explained: "Anyone can become an outstanding scholar, professor, or rabbi. But few can become a *posek*. . . . His decisions are . . . all filtered through his exquisitely trained mind and sensitive heart . . . the conviction and humbling knowledge that (his) decisions are an extension of Torah law and an expression of G-d's will."<sup>1</sup> Blu Greenberg, an Orthodox feminist scholar, notes, "what was a sociological truth about women in all previous generations—that they were the 'second sex'—was codified in many minute ways into *Halakhah* as religioethical concepts, binding upon future generations as well."<sup>2</sup>

Men and women are each obligated to fulfill specific commandments, many of which are sex delineated. Traditionally, women's obligations include lighting Sabbath candles at home, baking the Sabbath bread, and adhering to laws of sexual purity. These have reinforced a separate and powerful role for women, but one located entirely within the private and domestic sphere of the family. Women have no access to the public domain within Orthodoxy.

All traditional Jewish women were exempt from the central religious obligations concerning the relationship between the individual and the Creator: the requirements to study religious texts and the performance of time-bound rituals, including the three daily communal services with the recitation of creedal prayers. Time-bound commandments are those required to be performed at designated periods of the day, the year, and/or the life cycle in the attempt to entwine the secular and religious, the physical and spiritual aspects of life.

For a male child, the first time-bound commandment occurs when he is eight days old; his father, or male surrogate, performs the circumcision, initiating the male infant into the covenanted community at a public, hence male, service. Traditionally, at age thirteen each male becomes a *bar mitzvah*, fully obligated to live by the commandments. After this ceremony, males may be temporarily excused from performing time-bound commandments only under certain conditions: during the first week of mourning, or if too physically or mentally ill. Criminals may be excluded during the period of servitude. Always exempt, historically, are children under thirteen, slaves, and women. Male children would, of course, become juridical adults at age thirteen, slaves when freed. Only women could never participate fully in the public sphere, exempted by the tradition on the basis of biology. Today many girls from all branches of Judaism do have a *bat mitzvah* ceremony, but this liminal moment does not change their status within the Conservative or Orthodox traditions from exempted to that of obligated to perform the commandments. Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism do not view *halakhah* as binding, neither exempting nor obligating women or men.

Theoretically, the justification for disallowing women to serve as rabbis was based on the universal female exemption and the interpretation that only persons who are themselves obligated to observe the time-bound commandments can lead prayer services for equally obligated others. The public community, the congregation, has been tacitly understood as a male arena covenanted to God through maleness.

The seemingly natural and neutral moral imperative of the religious law exempts women from the public community of prayer and study—no matter what their level of commitment, scholarship, or marital status. Over the millennia, exemption has come to be interpreted as exclusion from the public domain, with women relegated to the category of religiously other than normative Jewish humanity.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

In 1886 the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) was founded in the United States as an institution for the training of religious scholars. Critical analysis and Western scholarship is used in studying sacred, classical texts, even while faculty are expected to accept the authority of the *halakhah* in their daily behavior. Thirty-two years after the seminary's founding, in 1918, the full framework for a Conservative movement included a network of affiliated synagogues, grouped under the rubric of the United Synagogue of America, and a professional association for its ordained rabbis, the Rabbinical Assembly. Today the Conservative branch of Judaism is the largest in America, claiming 1.2 million affiliated Jews.

Conservative Judaism defines its mission as confronting "the challenge to integrate tradition with modernity,"<sup>3</sup> evolving a blend of historical precedent and religious law with contemporary mores and knowledge. But this blending must grow out of the authority of the *halakhah*, the Jewish law, "which has never been monolithic or immovable."<sup>4</sup> But who shall be entitled to interpret which of the laws are immutable, the direct word of God, and which laws may be subject to reinterpretation, containing God's intent as understood by humans?

Legitimation of *poskim* (decision makers) and the process of explication are zealously guarded. The Rabbinical Assembly established a twenty-five-member Committee on Jewish Law and Standards to consider and advise on *halakhic* questions. Based on the logic and precedent of previous generations of rabbinical *poskim*, the Law Committee decides which laws and practices may be reinterpreted in light of modern considerations. However, its decisions are nonbinding; each member synagogue decides whether to accept the Law Committee's recommendation. For example, in the mid-1970s the Law Committee approved a *responsa*, reinterpretation, permitting women to be counted in the quorum of ten adults (*minyan*) needed to constitute a public prayer group. Yet two decades later one of the official religious services located in the seminary still refuses to count women in its quorum, one of the very few conservative services in the United States which also requires men and women to sit separately. A second seminary service was formed after women's entry into the rabbinic program, but it only counted women who publicly acknowledged all religious obligations including wearing previously traditional male prayer garments, the prayer shawl and phylactery. It took another ten years before a third *minyan* started, one which now allows all women to participate equally in the service.

## A CALL FOR CHANGE

In 1972 a group of Conservative women issued a "Call for Change" at the annual Rabbinical Assembly (RA) convention to redress what was later described as "the terrible choice between their identities as woman and as Jews."<sup>5</sup> Five years later, in 1977, RA members approved a new constitution which deleted the mention of sex in qualifications for membership. The RA had already accepted male rabbis ordained by other branches of Judaism into its midst; it seemed it might now consider women ordained by Reform and Reconstructionist seminaries. The RA also asked the JTS to study the contentious question of ordaining traditionally observant women by its own Conservative seminary. The Law Committee and the Rabbinical Assembly ceded their authority on *halakhic* reinterpretation to the JTS Faculty Senate.

At JTS traditionalist faculty vigorously objected to giving the power of a *posek* to other than eminent Talmudic scholars, whom they considered the authentic methodological gatekeepers. Even the most learned or pious woman was excluded from becoming a *posek* by the traditionalists' minimally acceptable criteria: publicly acknowledged *halakhic* scholarship and full public obligations. Women were exempted, historically disenfranchised by the very institution that provided credentialing.

To assist the Faculty Senate, the seminary chancellor established a commission of rabbis and laypeople, including women, to examine the question of whether the *halakhah* could permit women's ordination and to make a recommendation to the JTS Senate. A number of seminary scholars wrote *responsa* addressing the question of whether it was possible within the framework of Jewish law for women to share full membership in the religious community.

In 1979 the commission issued a positive recommendation to the chancellor. However, on 20 December 1979 the seminary faculty voted twenty-five to nineteen to table a decision, explaining: "The question has provoked unprecedented divisions at every level of the Movement. The bitter divergence of opinion threatens to inflict irreparable damage. . . . we move that the question be tabled until such time as a balanced committee of talmudic scholars, to be appointed by the Chancellor, has completed a systematic study of the status of women in Jewish law."<sup>6</sup>

The chancellor offered the possibility of a quasi-rabbinical program to those women who had petitioned for admission to the rabbinical school, a program which would allow women to take all rabbinical

courses but receive only a para-rabbinical credential. If a positive decision were made at a later time, the women might be retroactively eligible for ordination; however, this could not be guaranteed. The program was not established as only one woman accepted this alternative.

Four years after the vote to table, on 24 October 1983, the seminary faculty voted to admit women into its rabbinical school the following fall. A fifty-page *responsa* with twenty-three additional pages of endnotes, written by Rabbi Joel Roth, was accepted as the basis for the decision.

This *responsa* reiterated the two fundamental legal objections to the ordination of women: women are exempted from positive time-bound commandments; and a person who is not obligated cannot serve as an intermediary to help fulfill a commandment on behalf of one who is obligated. Since public prayer is a required, positive time-bound commandment, a woman cannot serve as a prayer leader or emissary for male congregants.

However, Roth reasoned, earlier generations of rabbis had allowed people, who so wished, to assume voluntarily obligations from which they had been exempted. Therefore, if certain women were to state they wished to assume full responsibility to observe all the obligations, then they might be able to serve in the rabbinical role of congregational prayer leaders.

One interviewee described this as a negative and reluctant basis on which to admit women; this reluctance was an issue the seminary never acknowledged or addressed during their years as students. In 1993, ten years after the Faculty Senate accepted this *t'shuvah*, interpretation, another interviewee noted that most current rabbinical students do not believe this logic can ultimately serve as the underpinning, the source of authority for the decision.

One rabbi remembered her feelings of estrangement and alienation from the logic that a woman had to overcome her fixed female nature in order to become equal to a male who attained status simply by being born male: "Women are now free to become men, as opposed to women now able to be rabbis. We're not equally valid. Women can be equal with men as long as we're just like men, only *less so* because men have the option of choosing to be traditional or non-traditional. Women *only* have the option of choosing non-traditional [that which is not the accepted role for religiously observant women]." Conservative Judaism still categorized women as a group as qualitatively defective, needing consciously to transcend their womanhood if they were to become religious leaders.

Roth's *responsa* opposed declaring that all females over thirteen were as equally obligated as men. He rejected arguments of equality,

of justice. "Ethics is not the issue, nor is egalitarianism . . . being halakhically serious is."<sup>7</sup>

#### THE FIRST CLASS OF SEMINARY WOMEN

The remainder of this chapter looks at fifteen of the eighteen women admitted to the rabbinical program in 1984, women who developed a dialectic of acceptance and resistance enabling them to be ready to enter rabbinical training at that historic moment. It examines their early years within the family and schooling, the mediating effect of spirituality, and some of their experiences as rabbinical students at the seminary.<sup>8</sup>

Each woman interviewed was thoughtful and articulate, projecting strong values, passionate commitments, and a determination to find her way through the contradictions and stresses in which she lived. Most spoke of needing a deeper, more personal commitment than that provided by their parents; all told of searching for individual meaning and purpose. They depicted the early development of a religious and cultural identity: a nuclear and sometimes intergenerational family which connected them to timeless historical memory or myth, and to an extended geographic tribal family.

#### Family and Early Schooling

Demographically these women were all Jewish by birth. Each had siblings, none were children of Holocaust survivors, and no one's parents divorced or separated when the children were living at home. Social problems such as abuse, teen pregnancies, and drugs were not mentioned.

Most grew up in large cities with extensive Jewish communities, but two lived in small towns where theirs was the only Jewish family. While there were differences in social class, geography, extent of politicized lifestyle within the family, and degree of ritual practice, each grew up in a family which acknowledged its religious identity and marked itself off from the majority culture. Almost all described an early connectedness to Judaism which occurred as a natural and ongoing part of their childhood. Each had extensive knowledge about her extended family and previous generations' devotion to or struggles within the Jewish tradition. Grandparents were important contributors to the early religious life of many, fostering a caring relationship. For most, there was a powerful sense of a family community and an integration of that family within the larger ethnic community.

A few described parents with a conflicted response to traditional Judaism, or families which were dysfunctional for periods of time. But even in these latter families, ethnicity was an integral piece of family life, not a disconnected add-on. As youngsters these particular women reached out to an extended network of relatives or found deeply formative relationships with a surrogate family—sometimes the community rabbi and his family—and immersed themselves in the synagogue, the historical community. At an early age, they chose to strengthen their own individual religious practices and commitment, perhaps in an attempt to heal family fractures by revivifying once-meaningful rituals, but certainly to connect themselves to a powerful historical tradition, or to a caring and supportive community.

All recounted family myths of noble actions, and also of traumatic adventures, of family members who were exemplars or rebels. The integration of family histories with cultural and/or religious traditions and ceremonies, and the implied responsibilities to their community of memory were literally ingested with their food. Each portrayed a cultural embeddedness, a network of multiple relational patterns—familial, peer, and intergenerational—which both facilitated and impeded their personal and religious growth.

Most had positive relationships with their parents. They discussed fathers or significant father figures in greater detail than mothers and with more affect—greater identification or more unresolved conflict. They characterized the conflicts as dealing with fairness and justice within family relationships. Ten related stories of mothers who were role models helping them learn to have confidence in themselves; three others found additional motherlike nurturers with whom they developed close ties.

The tradition exalted knowledge of the past, their homes were filled with books, and they entered school with a strong desire to learn. Each was achievement-oriented, excelling in her academic settings. Many spoke of class leadership positions, but others detailed lives bifurcated from that of their schoolmates, of constructing a parallel and totally separate Jewish environment of study and extracurricular Jewish youth leadership activities. None saw formal education as either peripheral or irrelevant. Even when experiencing anti-Semitic or sexist incidents in secular or religious school, they accepted the necessity of remaining committed to the educational process. They competed with and frequently exceeded the achievements of male peers, yet many were still dealing with feelings of academic inadequacy during their graduate studies at the seminary.

This strongly felt kinship and allegiance to their cultural and religious ancestry encouraged a sense of belonging and trust within the ethnic community. Their emotional involvement and lived commitment enabled them to affirm their religious and personal identity and authenticity. As with most young women, there was continuous reinforcement for attachment and connection to family and community, rather than for separation.

Within the family they absorbed the lessons of argumentation, questioning, multiple conversations, and the art of negotiation between and within generations and cultures. This has been an accepted art throughout Jewish history, with dissenting opinions of religious scholars recorded alongside interpretations accepted as normative. For many of these women, discussion and dissent were reasonable tools for growth when expressed within the stability of the family and religious community.

While accepting the strictures of both Jewish and American cultures, they increasingly understood that one need not be disloyal to disagree with the dictates of authority. Conflicting views could be equally committed to finding truth. Astute in the art of reflective and critical thought, they discovered how to test social limits and to take public stands without fear of being totally ostracized from their various communities.

They needed these strengths. Crises of trust emerged by their teen years. The interviews were filled with stories of limiting boundaries, contradictions. Issues of gender and ethnicity, inclusion and exclusion, separation and connection multiplied as they grew older. Each struggled to find a balance between cultivating a healthy and creative individual integrity, and a deeply ingrained sense of responsibility to continue the historical ethnic memory. How to hold tight to a tradition which both hobbled and nourished spiritual growth was a typical issue.

They evolved a variety of strategies to circumvent restrictions to their personal legitimacy. Some learned they could retain private feelings and understandings which disagreed with given public truths, even while remaining in a school or synagogue setting which they perceived as trying to diminish them. A few created an inner world structured to allow for private feelings, questions, or searchings to confirm their own authenticity; others developed an additional dimension of activity to supplement the sanctioned area.

This separation and resistance was negotiated within relationship and connectedness to the public sphere. Fourteen women recounted painful experiences of individuation, contesting family or peers and

willing to be different, sometimes to the point of describing herself as having two separate personae at a particular time. These experiences resonated with stories of other family members who had also rebelled, who had wrestled with dissonance while working toward developing their own individuality. Each constructed an identity which reached toward change within continuity, toward healing within family relationships, toward maintaining and reinforcing the religious community, toward developing her own growth as an educated, spiritual, committed Jew.

They adjusted the male model of successful independent functioning, reframing it with connectedness. They covertly challenged the hierarchy embedded in secular education and religious law and custom by viewing themselves as created in the image of the divine.

### The Mediating Effect of Spirituality

Only four of the fifteen women interviewed grew up in families rooted in traditional ritual observance; three of these were daughters of Conservative congregational rabbis. Five women saw their families as involved positively within their ethnic communities—belonging to a synagogue, wanting them to have some religious education, culturally celebrating their religious identity—but not as fully observant or knowledgeable as these daughters wanted to be. A few families were not affiliated within a local ethnic community, but did have a strong sense of extended family and provided some religious education which their daughters supplemented. Two women sought their own religious education during their precollege years. One searched for spirituality and political attachment within her secular community, while holding onto positive memories of grandmothers' spirituality, finding a religious community and education in her junior year in college.

Most described their siblings as being much less committed to and less passionate about religious education, ritual observance, or synagogue attendance. Despite the possible risk of detachment, at least five women, as teenagers, bound themselves to stricter ritual obligations than was comfortable for their parents. Their mothers acquiesced to the additional work of cooking separately for their daughters' observance of *kashrut*, respecting and supporting their daughters' efforts to become self-directed, and strengthening the bonds of family and religious connectedness.

Taking on the commandments seemingly reinforced their ability to rely on their own feelings and insight, allowed them to be responsible

for creating their own synthesis of intellectual and religious experiences. They had equipped themselves to take risks, to chance that some disruption of family norms would not imperil family stability.

Judaism never barred women from praying in the synagogue; therefore, each had some exposure to public prayer services. In the few families which rejected synagogue affiliation the daughters found religious service through a grandparent or within a Jewish camp setting. Those who grew up immersed in the religion accepted the authority of the tradition; they went to synagogue and became emotionally committed to prayer and ritual as young girls. Before college they taught junior congregations of youngsters under thirteen, led youth group services to the extent possible, and even instructed their brothers in conducting services for adults.

But Conservative Judaism would not allow their participation as equals in the adult congregation at the age when their male peers became obligated to enter the adult community. They experienced not merely discouragement but an inviolable prohibition against taking on rituals and wearing prayer garments tied to male privilege. Their most basic identity, as females on the verge of menarche, forbade them from any contact with the Torah, the prayer shawl, or the phylacteries.

As they became both more knowledgeable in Jewish scholarship and more understanding of their own spiritual and psychological needs, there was an increasing awareness of and chafing against contradictions and disenfranchisement. Yet these observant young women remained connected with traditional Judaism, initially internalizing the sacral ban against their connection with the basic symbols of public affirmation. Appropriating these forbidden symbols would have been an empowerment of self above the *halakhah*, an act potentially destructive to Judaism, and their Jewishness was as integral a part of them as their being female. Later, as rabbinical students, many were able to reflect on these contradictions, alluding to an ongoing search for balance, the dialectic tension between individual identity and the dicta of family, community, and religion.

Perhaps to relieve dissonance, two-thirds of the interviewees had decided to take on many of the traditional obligations by the time they had completed their undergraduate studies. There was an intense need to unify the religious and secular parts of their lives. Some became strict Sabbath observers; many prayed on a daily basis. A few wore ritual prayer garments, *tallis*, *kippah*, and/or *tefillin* (prayer shawl, head covering, and phylacteries which had been restricted by custom to men) during public prayer services well before the legal decision to admit women into the Conservative rabbinical seminary. As one interviewee

said, "I knew women were exempt from the *mitzvah* of *tallis* and *tefillin* as part of a larger network of exemption. If I *reject* that exemption for myself—I'm a woman who shares equally with men in every facet of Jewish obligation—then I shall be entitled, a powerful word psychologically, entitled to expect equality of rights in return. That was an important decision I made when I was eighteen."

Tying themselves to the religious law, more than half the interviewees studied, prayed, or lived within Orthodox communities for a period in their teen or adult lives to obtain the knowledge and imbibe the spirituality of that community. Ultimately, after intense struggle, they were not able to give up the feminist elements of their own identity: "In the Lubavitch community I saw many very happy, strong, totally satisfied women. They gave up access to the central areas of the synagogue and *halakhic* decisions. . . . They chose a level of spiritual intensity over feminism, not a choice I could make."

The women described an internal world of personal insights, of experiences of self-enlightenment, of self-actualizing openness, which enabled them to cope with familial or institutional inconsistencies: "I formulated it [the issue of women in the rabbinate] as competing Jewish values: the Jewish value that all people are created in the image of God versus the Jewish value of how we relate to and preserve the tradition. This idea of 'being created in the Image,' that I was basing myself on something that was Jewish, that could justify the direction in which I was moving."

Another described her sense of the deity which had helped in the quest to unify the disparate pieces of the self: "My Jewish search has also been a search for wholeness as a woman. For me, God is that entity, the One that tells us that we are whole when people are telling us we're not. God is the reference point that allows for human wholeness."

Another spoke of the presence of a "guiding hand" in her life, a religious way of living in the world through discerning the miraculous in everyday events, patterns which permeated and reinforced her understanding that humans live rooted in a community within the care, the blessing, the struggle, and finally the mystery of the divinity.

However, most theological metaphors were distinctly nontraditional, describing God as "a process," and "entity," even a human creation: "Community has permeated my theology of why Judaism needs to exist. I am traditional in my beliefs. I put value on ritual; I believe it's very important to conserve. But even when I was very young and would sit in services singing, my feeling was that we brought God into existence almost by our being together, praying together. A flip version

of the creation story—we've created God." Another also alluded to the urgency of community: "My primary connection, primary reason for being Jewish, observant, or wanting to become a rabbi probably didn't have to do with God. It had more to do with community and being of service. I was disturbed by the failure to include women in a communal way."

All who described their vision of the rabbinate spoke in terms of a nonauthoritarian relationship with the community. They strongly believed in their capacity to effect the world positively, that they have something of value to offer.

Perhaps because Judaism has always put less emphasis on theology or creed and more on behavior, many of these Conservative women described spirituality in terms of study, law, and empowering themselves and others to find connectedness within the tradition. One said, "*Halakhah's* a process that God gave to us to improve the world. It evolves as our sensibilities evolve; it can't be a stagnant *halakhah*, or it doesn't command our allegiance."

Another described spirituality in terms of love and confrontation with biblical and rabbinical texts which ground the law: "I can be studying a page of Talmud and get lost in the page; it becomes a spiritual experience detached from all my other baggage. And then I take three steps back and say, 'I can't believe how they are looking at women.' Everywhere I turn, textually, I'm in trouble. I feel torn when I deliver sermons. It's always a battle how to introduce congregants to the text, to Judaism, and, at the same time to critique what is going on."

A third found positive growth in her own *halakhic* practice, both a deepening of meaning and a flexibility in observance: "I get very frustrated by the hierarchy of Judaism that says Orthodoxy is the most, Conservative Judaism second most. The most what? Who shelters the most homeless? Most is a quantitative word that doesn't apply; religion is not about racking up the maximum *mitzvah* points. It can be about being the deepest, or the most expert in the one *mitzvah* you choose to devote your life to. For this reason I am much more forgiving of myself about changes, lapses in observance than I ever was."

Their spirituality contains a moral vision, a passion for justice and rights, care for those who are treated as different, problematic, or excluded. How to revivify the tradition, transform a Judaism which objectifies, subordinates women in ritual, language, image, and text? Are women Jews? Another said: "I can help to create that new tradition, but I'll always be straddling two worlds. Women need to be able to read the *siddur* (prayer book) and have a vision of God that isn't all masculine. Women need to know, to believe that God is not male. Men



need that too. We need to think beyond the patriarchal system of Judaism and give it new life." But for most Conservative women rabbis, this must be accomplished within the framework of the *halakhah*: "This tradition has been culled through time, the wisdom of the ages. There's something that transcends what any one person, any one generation can contribute. To me, that is divine. There are elements of ritual that are so powerful and important and valuable that we don't understand consciously; we do not have the right to deprive future generations of those rituals. We have the right to reinterpret them, to understand them differently, using the sources to write *t'shuvot*."

### Diverse and Invisible within the Rabbinical Program

Only three women entered the rabbinical program directly upon graduation from an undergraduate college. Even the youngest had worked in the Jewish community; the others had spent years working as Jewish professionals. Many had taken additional years of Jewish studies. Amy Eilberg entered the rabbinical program having previously completed all the course work for a doctoral degree in Talmud. She had decided that a life of research was not her passion and left the graduate school to get a master's degree in social work. Nine of the fifteen had been enrolled in the seminary's graduate school or had taken some courses at JTS prior to their admission into the rabbinical program; these had been unequivocally positive experiences.

Their years as rabbinical students contrasted dramatically. For some, the problems started with the legitimizing *t'shuva* that allowed their entry into rabbinical school. One described the *t'shuva* as "the most meticulously researched and reasoned from a *halakhic* point of view, and also the closest to saying that you couldn't do it."

Interviewees described faculty and administration's lack of comprehension that the different socialization patterns women had experienced might clash with the forms of knowledge, values, and social relationships prevailing in the rabbinical school. They portrayed an administration which fully believed that the hitherto male rabbinate was gender-neutral, that women could become professionalized in the same way as male students into a seemingly androgynous model.

But these women had no role models, and the seminary did not understand that many had been struggling for years with searching critiques, histories of conflict with issues such as sexist language, sexist liturgy, and text which viewed women as peripheral. However, these tensions and questions were not on any agenda. One woman told of making an announcement after the opening breakfast on the first day

of rabbinical school and the reaction to her statement: "I really wanted to ask the women to get together, but do you dare do such a thing in this place the first day. I said, 'If any women would like to stay afterwards, we'll have a chat.' I can't tell you the *extreme* feedback from that, the craziness, the sense there was a *conspiracy to overthrow the Chancellor*; people were so horrified!"

The women in the first class were diverse individuals in age, previous level of religious observance, and feminist consciousness. Many spoke of episodes of social injustice or personal discrimination at the rabbinical school, and ways they had individually tried to modify patriarchal strictures; others assumed there was equal access for women and goodwill, and they had confidence in the authority of the received truths of teachers and tradition. One attributed adjustment problems to her own "short-comings," seemingly unaware of systemic problems.

There was a fragile women's group that never evolved into a recognized or effective presence. The women who participated felt too uncomfortable to put up notices, let alone meet at the seminary. Most discussions dealt with venting personal issues, such as handling sexism in a class; macro solutions, on the institutional level, were beyond the capability of the group. The pressure of time, the structure of the curriculum and scholastic demands, and the diversity of their personal lives were among the factors that hindered them from sharing, listening, and developing an activist agenda or systemic approaches for change.

Perhaps there were unstated, unexamined reasons as well. Did they perceive that any critique might possibly shatter their still tenuous individual goals? Some seemed to feel unduly responsible for the comfort of the larger community. After the acrimonious divisions created in allowing women into the program, was any seeming challenge so threatening to the hegemony of the seminary and the tradition that the women themselves feared that Conservative Judaism, their home, might not survive the encounter with modernity and feminism?

Members of the first class of women were not able to find answers from their own lives on how to build cooperatively and responsibly in order to confront values which deprecated and undermined their authenticity. Similar to other women who have pioneered nontraditional positions without female role models, their commitment came from family or community roots, from individual confrontations with inequity. There was an absence of conscious, cohesive, and collective strategies for change. While students they found no theoretical or conceptual binding to unify their needs or concerns.

## UPDATE

A meeting convened by the author with women attending the annual RA Convention in 1992, and conversations with other members of the first class the following year, reveal that there have been no collaborative or regularly supportive efforts among the women since ordination. Indeed, the breakfast meeting at the RA Convention was the first time that some of the women had been together since their student days. Although one woman did start a newsletter to try to keep all women rabbis and cantors in touch with each other, she was not able to continue this on her own; an ongoing official mechanism had not yet been established by the seminary or the women themselves. At the RA breakfast meeting there was no general agreement about how or whether to use their abilities and increasing power to transform their institutions and the public domain.

One person, comparing her first-year class with current students, saw her peers as having a "historical binding-together" which did not seem to be present in their seminary days. She suggested even that minimal tie is apparently absent for today's women students. Many women still feel besieged, and that it is necessary to censor their comments in class; there is little tolerance for those students who think differently. As late as 1993, women in the rabbinical school had no common conversation; their differences were wide-ranging, encompassing traditionalists, lesbians, feminists, and radical feminists. A nascent women's *Rosh Chodesh minyan* (biblical holiday for women, resurrected in modern times by Jewish women, especially Jewish feminists, as a time to meet and celebrate together) which started in September 1991 split apart in spring 1993 over the issue of men being invited to participate without the consent of the entire group.

In questioning the RA's Placement Bureau in 1993 about the percentage of graduates who take pulpit positions upon ordination, it was explained that the office was not yet equipped to answer such questions. The bureau stated that it did not keep any statistics and did not study placement patterns, although it acknowledged that this "should be looked at." A hand count was made of the 20 rabbis who graduated in May 1993; 5 of the 9 males took a pulpit position; 6 of the 11 women also took a pulpit position. The year 1993 was the first in which a larger number of women than men were ordained (55 percent). However, the rabbinical class which entered in September 1993 was composed of 25 men and 9 women (26 percent). This brought the student body in the rabbinical school to 137, including 55 women (40 percent).

A total of fifty-two women were ordained between May 1985 and May 1993. According to conversations with women from the first class, their best guess is that perhaps five or six of their number currently hold part-time or full-time pulpit positions. Most of these are as solo or assistant rabbis in small congregations, one of whom had "grown her congregation" above two hundred members. With no mechanism for the women to keep in touch with each other, and without statistics from the Placement Office, one would have to search through all members of the Rabbinical Assembly to determine their counterparts who are pulpit rabbis.

Those in pulpits who are married and have children struggle to balance the needs of congregation, family, and self. One rabbi felt it became a bit easier the longer she was with her congregation: "They now know me and trust me if I tell them a problem can wait until I'm in the office in the morning." Another problem which some mentioned was finding a congregation which met their religious needs but, at the same time, was lenient enough to accept their husbands' needs, since in some cases they were much less observant than their wives.

*Women in the Rabbinate: Dynamics of Change* was the title of a conference held at JTS in October 1993 to mark the tenth anniversary of the decision to admit women to the rabbinical school. One stated goal was to "help the Seminary understand what happens ritually, behaviorally, emotionally to students; what it means to educate a person to become a rabbi." Plenary topics included: historic models of change and resistance, the challenge of women's rabbinic careers, Judaism and the spiritual life of women, and ministry for the next generation.

Many attended the conference with some expectation that it would celebrate ten years of women in the rabbinate. But the seminary organizers planned a balanced scholarly conference which included presentations by opponents of women's ordination. Rabbi Joel Roth, whose *t'shuvah* was used to open the *halakhic* restriction, stated that in retrospect, because of divisions which subsequently occurred between factions within the Conservative movement, it was a mistake to have allowed women to enter rabbinical training.

Toward the close of the conference, at the end of another presentation of panelists which left almost no time for discussion or processing, an unscheduled event occurred. One rabbi stood up and announced that there needed to be a ritual to connect and honor large numbers of those in the audience. As she called different groups, including rabbis and educators, to the front of the auditorium to participate in the ritual, there was an elation and enthusiasm which engulfed the conference. In breaking the hierarchical model of panelists talking to a passive audi-

ence, the conference was animated as communities of people joyously connected with one another. Within a year of the conference, a new, third religious service started at the seminary, the first truly egalitarian service which allows women to participate fully.

#### SUMMARY

Conservative women rabbis, like their Reconstructionist and Reform sister rabbis, struggle to maintain a healthy and creative individuality, balancing the public and the private, the secular and the spiritual aspects of their lives. However, Conservative women are additionally committed to live within the strictures of *halakhah*. All tacitly accepted a limit to their position of equality at the time of the interviews: *halakhic* restrictions prevent women, even those who have taken on all the obligations of the law and who are ordained as rabbis, from serving as legal religious witnesses. All accepted the *halakhic* process as the appropriate method to modify systemic injustices.

Entry into the rabbinate focused on the desire for personal authenticity and equality of obligation and authority within the system. They did not link this access to a radical critique of the system. They wanted to defend the integrity, the conserving force of *halakhah*.

As maturing young women, many evolved an emotional understanding that it could not have been God's plan to exclude them from the sacred aspects of the religion because of their biology. They came to the conclusion that the human authors of the Bible and of rabbinic texts, submerged in the cultures of their time, had written down flawed misunderstandings of God's word.

Although the women did not speak about a feminist theology, their experience of God was not literal, not described with human attributes, not visualized as a dichotomy between human and divine. Imagery encompassed connectedness, "a unity of wholeness and holiness" or "experiencing the divine spark that's in human beings." The spiritual or sacred was not separate from everyday life and behavior, not abstract theologizing, but "finding God when we reach out to each other."

Spirituality seemed to enable each woman to insist on the right to mark out her own separate path to individual piety and devotion, but as one who refused to relinquish her profound immersion in and emotional commitment to the collectivity of the Conservative Jewish community. Each strained to remain a loyal adherent to that community of belief while searching for her own personal, existential encounters with revelation. Intertwining ritual and revelation like a double helix,

each patterned herself in a reflection of the unity expressed in the Hebrew word *Echad*, an image of the undivided wholeness of the Creator.

However, in their rabbinical training they discovered a multiplicity of practices, norms, and imperatives which fostered gender barriers and hierarchies of male privilege and power relationships. They wanted an educational process that would include a search for meaningful personal understanding along with the acquisition of facts. The seminary should "model the rabbi as questioner. It's an egalitarianism; saying we're all searching together. Rabbis have to deliver a message about how to become better human beings. It's not preaching to people what they should do, but how you and I, together, can work towards that goal."

Although many wanted to revitalize or transform the seminary, in actuality there was little change during their years there. The first class of women completed the program in different years, as separated individuals who did not know many of their female peers on an intimate basis, who rarely encountered a supportive, nurturing community of women or men.

Yet, despite institutional obstructions and personal anxieties, they dedicated themselves to strengthening the Jewish community. They continue to relearn their early lessons of tolerating uncertainty, suppressing negative reactions, and interweaving attachment and autonomy. Separately, each strives in her life's journey to fulfill the potential for leadership and her concern for equality and justice, and to deepen and share her love for Judaism.<sup>9</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Emanuel Feldman, "The Torah, More G-d's Law than Ours," *Sh'ma* (6 October 1987): 148-50.
2. Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981), 4, 5.
3. Robert Gordis, *Emet Ve-emunah: Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1988), 10.
4. *Ibid.*, 15.
5. Conversation with Rabbi Amy Eilberg.
6. Seymour Siegel, "Conservative Judaism and Women Rabbis," *Sh'ma* (8 February 1980): 49-51.
7. Simon Greenberg, *The Ordination of Women as Rabbis: Studies and Responsa* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1988).

8. Quotes in the remainder of this chapter are taken from interviews held in late 1988 and early 1989 with fifteen of the eighteen women who entered the rabbinical school in 1984. At the time of the interviews, one-third of the women were ordained; another third were in their final year of training; and the remaining five were ordained the following year, including one woman who had transferred to Reform Judaism's seminary, Hebrew Union College.
9. This chapter is based on the dissertation by Sydell Ruth Schulman, "Empowerment and Ordination: A Study of the First Class of Women Admitted to Rabbinical Training at the Jewish Theological Seminary," completed in May 1992 at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey.

## Women's Voices: The Challenge of Feminism to Judaism

*Sue Levi Elwell*

### INTRODUCTION

Jewish women have never been silent. The Bible records the words of Eve, Sarah, Hannah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, Miriam, Hulda, Ruth, and others. The Talmud introduces us to the sages Beruriah and Ima Shalom, Yalta and an elusive Matrona. For most of Jewish history, however, Jewish women's voices have gone unheard.

In the last hundred years, there have been several attempts to give women's stories a wider hearing, an expanded audience. In 1910 scholar and social reformer Bertha Pappenheim translated the memoirs of her distant relative Gluckel of Hameln (1646–1724) into German, but this important work was ignored by historians until sixty years later.<sup>1</sup> Henrietta Szold's pioneering work on women's devotional prayers was treated as a curiosity.<sup>2</sup> And in the early 1980s a professor in rabbinical school warned this author that focusing attention on Jewish women would render her an ineffective historian.

Today, Jewish women's voices are finally being heard: in the pulpit, in the classroom, and in the academy. Jewish women's words are being read by scholars, by students, and by schoolchildren. Jewish women's prayers, songs, and petitions are finally being incorporated into the liturgy. The influence of Jewish women's insights, political commitments, and deep religious convictions is propelling Jewish women into both Jewish and secular arenas in greater numbers and with more focused energy than ever before in history.

After a brief historical introduction, this chapter will explore six discrete areas in which Jewish women—professional and lay, ordained rabbis and invested cantors, and leaders in synagogues, community centers, and voluntary organizations—have taken the lead in challeng-

ing and changing Judaism. These are: prayer, context and content; study; Jewish law; life cycle; holiday cycle; and coalition building.

#### JEWISH WOMEN LEADERS: HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS

"And Miriam the prophet . . . took her timbrel in her hand and all the women followed her lead" (Exod. 15:20). Since the time of the Bible, women leaders have set the pace and the tone for the forward march of the people of Israel. It is clear from texts as early as the second century that the words of the scholar Beruriah were honored by men and women alike. Bernadette Brooten's path-breaking scholarship on women leaders in ancient synagogues dispelled previously held theories that the synagogue has always been an exclusive men's club.<sup>3</sup> Because of the inability to transcend the sexist norms of the peoples among whom Jews have lived for so much of their history, however, it has only been in the recent past that women's leadership has been recognized as essential to the continued health of the Jewish community.

However, there have always been exceptional women whose leadership has been acknowledged by the Jewish community. Beatrice de Luna Mendes, called Dona Gracia Nasi, fled the persecution of the Inquisition and then used her wealth and influence to arrange passage for thousands of Portuguese Jews to safe harbors. She was a patron of arts and literature in Ferraro, Italy, and later in Constantinople she became known as a leading merchant and a generous philanthropist.<sup>4</sup> Gluckel of Hameln was a respected businesswoman in the early years of the eighteenth century in Hamburg, Germany.<sup>5</sup> Hannah Rachel Werbermacher became a Hasidic teacher in the Ukraine in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1904 social reformer Bertha Pappenheim founded the *Judischer Frauenbund*, the German Jewish Women's Organization, to lobby the Jewish community for full religious rights for women. In addition to her political work, Pappenheim also established a home for young Jewish immigrant women, many of whom had turned to prostitution as their only means of survival.<sup>6</sup> More recently, Lily Montague helped to create the liberal Jewish movement in England, and in America both Hannah Greenebaum Solomon, a founder of the National Council of Jewish Women, and her contemporary Henrietta Szold, Zionist pioneer and founder of Hadassah (the Women's Zionist Organization of America), were acknowledged as extraordinary women of their time.<sup>7</sup>

But for every woman who was honored for her work in the community, the contributions of many others were overlooked, undervalued, or ignored. Without women's work, Jewish communities in

Europe and America could not have functioned, but it has been only recently that women have begun to serve as rabbis, cantors, and lay leaders in synagogues; as presidents of Jewish communal welfare and defense organizations; as administrators in schools for children; and as teachers in schools and seminaries for adolescents and adults. What is important about these changes, however, is not simply that women are finally moving into positions of leadership but, rather, that their leadership styles and goals and intentions often differ from the men with whom they have trained. Many of the women now moving up in the contemporary Jewish community are challenging the operational assumptions of a community that solidified in the 1950s and 1960s. Rightly assessing that the last decades of the twentieth century demand a very different response, they have questioned the hierarchical structure of the community and created new models of cooperative leadership. Some insist that the community welcome into its midst not only women but also Jews from non-European backgrounds, interfaith families, families of divorce, gay and lesbian Jews, and others who have felt marginalized. Some challenge accepted definitions of Jewish professional success by their work in hospices, in homes for the elderly, in prisons, among the homeless, and in nonurban areas, and by their insistence on bringing themselves to their work in a deeply personal way. For many contemporary Jewish women leaders, the model of Bertha Pappenheim, the scholarly social activist who lived among the immigrant women whose lives she saved by offering them shelter, support, and then job and language training, is a more potent model than the distant, learned rabbi and teacher or the politically motivated communal official. Acknowledging the imperative and the challenge of combining the personal and the political, bringing together commitment to family with commitment to the community, women leaders are helping the Jewish community see itself with new eyes.

#### PRAYER

On Friday evenings and Saturday mornings, Jews gather in synagogues and centers to celebrate the Sabbath with psalms, songs, and prayers, and, depending on custom, by the public reading or chanting of biblical texts. In the past twenty years, in non-Orthodox *minyanim* (prayer quorums) around the world, both the content and the context of these Sabbath prayers have changed. In most liberal congregations, men and women lead the congregation in prayer, chant or read from the Torah scrolls, and teach through sermons and stories. And in in-

creasing numbers of congregations, change has extended not only to those who lead and those who respond but to the language of prayer as well. Following the lead of the liturgical revisions pioneered first in Europe and then in America,<sup>8</sup> feminist liturgists have successfully introduced a number of innovations into the Sabbath, daily, and holiday liturgy.

One change replaces exclusively male God-language with gender-neutral or gender-balanced references to the divine.<sup>9</sup> A correlative of this is the pioneering work by Marcia Falk which challenges Jews to reconsider the traditional blessing formulation. She suggests that instead of addressing the divine with "Blessed are You, Our God," we can acknowledge our role in blessing: "We bless the Source of Life. . . ."<sup>10</sup>

Another change includes the matriarchs when the patriarchs are invoked. The traditional prayer that begins "God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob" becomes "God of our ancestors, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, God of Sarah, God of Rebecca, God of Rachel and God of Leah." Some are now questioning whether the "other" matriarchs—Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah—should be included in this prayer.

A third innovation recognizes that Hebrew's limitation of either male or female verb forms makes women invisible as ones who pray. By offering a choice for one of the first morning prayers—for example, not only *modeh ani* but also *modah ani*: "I thank you, God, for returning my soul to me"—women can speak in a feminine first person that enables us to hear our own voices as never before.

The integration of prayers and poems written by women, including women's interpretations of traditional texts and new "texts" composed by women, has changed the liturgy,<sup>11</sup> as has creating worship experiences that focus on interaction of individuals with one another and individuals with the community rather than on the exchange of the service leader with the members of the congregation. This latter innovation includes but is not limited to: empowering a range of individuals to share leadership of worship; intentional spatial arrangements; making the services linguistically accessible to all (in some communities the Hebrew of prayer is a barrier to women's participation even more than it is for men); building a shared base of knowledge of songs and responses; and the institutionalization of portions in the service for individual prayer as well as for some kind of dialogic or shared experience.<sup>12</sup>

## STUDY

Traditionally, Jewish text study has been a field of endeavor closed to all but a few, handpicked Jewish men. Jewish women's studies, a field of academic inquiry unimagined two decades ago, is now attracting graduate students to programs of Bible, history, anthropology, sociology, literature, the arts, and traditional Jewish texts. Each year dissertations are written that open new areas of inquiry or explore newly discovered texts, or study older sources that illuminate previously obscured women's lives and the contexts of those lives. The publication of Judith Plaskow's *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (HarperCollins, 1990) challenges the androcentric vision of normative Jewish theological discourse. Judith Romney Wegner's *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (Oxford University Press, 1988) provides a comprehensive and sophisticated reading of essential Talmudic texts, and makes many of those arguments available in English for the first time. Judith Z. Abrams's work *The Talmud for Beginners* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1991) also opens the world of rabbinic discourse to the non-Hebrew reader and is one of the first guides to the Talmud to be written by a woman, who, in Abrams's case, is trained both as a rabbi and as a Talmud scholar. Abrams's *Women of the Talmud* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1995) focuses on the depiction of women in these ancient texts. Rabbi Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut bring together feminist and Jewish scholarship in their able editing of *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue* (Jewish Publication Society, 1992), which offers a comprehensive and moving account of Jewish women's spiritual search from the time of the Jerusalem temple until the present. The basic text for an increasing number of courses in Jewish women's studies has become Ellen Umansky and Dianne Ashton's comprehensive *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality: A Sourcebook* (Beacon, 1992), for it includes diary entries, letters, poems, prayers, and sermons composed by Jewish women since 1560.<sup>13</sup>

What is the impact of these works and others on traditional curricula of Jewish studies? In the Orthodox world, works that have been influenced by feminism have little impact, but the number of women studying texts that were formerly studied only by men continues to increase. A recent article by Orthodox feminist Blu Greenberg mentions four institutions that exist solely for women's study of traditional texts.<sup>14</sup> Surely, as an increasing number of women study in such programs and institutions, these "new" texts will find a place in students' homes, if not in traditional classrooms. Greenberg points out that the

mere fact that these women are studying, regardless of the fact that they are studying only traditional texts in a traditional context, has the power to change both the institutions which they study and the community in which these women live, in addition, of course, to changing the women themselves.

#### JEWISH LAW

Jewish law and its interpretation stands at the center of traditional Jewish life. For traditional Jews, *halakhah*, the law, is of divine origin and guides every aspect of a Jew's life. Liberal Jews consider the law to be part of the vast textual legacy of the ages and may respect but reject its tenets and direction. For the first time in history, women are now studying and becoming proficient interpreters of *halakhah*. As students and teachers of the Talmud, the codes, and the *responsa* literature, women are now becoming fluent in a language of discourse that has determined many of the attitudes, behaviors, and mores of the traditional Jewish community. And as women take their place at the study table and behind the teacher's lectern, they are challenging long-held notions of women's credibility. Traditional Jewish law explicitly states that women are not admissible witnesses, yet as Orthodox feminist Blu Greenberg has pointed out, both in Israel and America, more and more religious courts are finding ways for women's voices to be heard, if not directly, then through male interpreters and intermediaries.<sup>15</sup> Other legal standards that are being challenged by women are the prohibition against women initiating divorce and the prohibition against women forming a *minyan*, or prayer quorum. Traditional women are now banding together and taking to the streets, through organizations such as Getting Equal Treatment (G.E.T.) and Agunah, advocacy groups for women unable to procure religious divorce, and challenging the traditional community to begin to take action to equalize the inherent discrimination against women in Jewish law. In small prayer or study groups, other women are taking smaller steps to challenge the traditional status quo. Using newly acquired study and liturgical skills, they are teaching other women and their own daughters. Still others, including scholars Judith Romney Wegner, Judith Z. Abrams, Rivka Haut, and Rachel Adler, are adding to the legal literature, and their thoughtful essays and books are influencing a widening circle of Jewish thinkers.<sup>16</sup> As Greenberg asserts,

these changes are . . . nothing short of revolution. Though when taken item by item none is earth shaking, when measured together

they add up to the redefinition of women's role in the liturgical, spiritual, and intellectual life of the community. . . . *Halakah* will again open itself to interpretation, and we will see within it a definition of equality, as well as distinctiveness of male and female, that will carry us faithfully forward into the next four thousand years of Jewish life.<sup>17</sup>

#### LIFE CYCLE

Traditional Jewish life-cycle rituals focus on the life cycle of the individual in the context of the family and the Jewish community. Beginning with birth and covenant rituals (for boys through *brit milah*, or ritual circumcision), the ritual cycle continues with *bar mitzvah* and then on to marriage and then death.

Following the lead of women lay leaders, rabbis, and cantors, contemporary Jews are challenging the limited opportunities for celebrating significant points of transition in their lives. For the last twenty-five years, Jews have been welcoming daughters with an explicit articulation of bringing these Jews into the covenant, but without circumcision. Since 1922 liberal Jews have been following the lead of Judith Kaplan Eisenstein, who became the first American Jewish girl to celebrate becoming a full member of her Jewish community by being called to the Torah at age thirteen. It is now commonplace in liberal (Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative) synagogues for girls to prepare for a *bat mitzvah* ceremony sometime between the ages of twelve and thirteen.<sup>18</sup> In addition to the *bat mitzvah*, Jews are also acknowledging other rites of passage in the adolescent years with menarche ceremonies and rituals for leaving home.

Marriage ceremonies have been profoundly influenced by egalitarian approaches to partnership, and most liberal Jews choose an alternative text to the traditional *ketubah* (marriage document), which transfers ownership of the bride from one party (traditionally the father) to another (the husband). The scholar Rachel Adler has devised a *brit ahuvim*, a partnership document that can be used by heterosexual and gay and lesbian couples that focuses on the mutual responsibilities of each party in the relationship.<sup>19</sup> Some rabbis have adapted traditional marriage ceremonies for gay and lesbian couples, and others have suggested new rituals that acknowledge the particular challenges of establishing gay and lesbian partnerships in a heterosexist world.

Rituals and ceremonies have been developed that transform the traditional immersion in a *mikveh* (ritual bath), which precedes a marriage and then is used each month following the completion of menstrual bleeding. These new rituals, which can be used as part of healing

after rape, acknowledgment of childhood sexual abuse or incest, abortion, hysterectomy, or divorce or the end of a relationship, focus on restoring the integrity of the individual who immerses herself, not on her sexuality in relationship to another. Intentional immersion, accompanied with formulaic words and blessings, is reclaimed as a powerful vehicle for personal transition and transformation. Rabbi Elyse Goldstein first suggested using the *mikveh* before rabbinic ordination. When a candidate for the rabbinate immerses herself on the eve of ordination, s/he is preparing herself or himself for a life of service to her/his people rather than for a life of conjugal happiness with a spouse. Rather than denying one's sexuality, however, the immersion can celebrate the integration of sensuality and essence with spirituality.

Other new rituals include *simchat hochma*, the celebration of wisdom, which is often connected to a sixtieth or seventieth birthday. This new ritual, pioneered by women, is a celebration of age and achievement and an acknowledgment that the individual is now facing the end of her/his life. The community gathers to honor each elder, and by doing so reinforces the traditional Jewish value of respect and honor for the senior members of the Jewish community.<sup>20</sup> Other new rituals acknowledge the range of families that now make up Jewish communities: blended and step-families, intentional families, gay and lesbian families, adoptive parents, and more.<sup>21</sup>

#### HOLIDAY RITUALS: THE EXAMPLE OF PASSOVER

While women's voices are beginning to be heard in holiday rituals throughout the year, Passover seders that incorporate inclusive liturgy and song are now celebrated in many homes across America, Europe, and Israel. The primary liturgy for the annual Passover celebration is the *haggadah*, literally the "telling" of the Exodus story. For centuries, Jews have adapted the *haggadah* to reflect the norms and needs of individual communities and families, retelling the story of liberation and redemption through the lens of their own experience. The *haggadah* is ordered according to the tradition, but within its proscribed framework the feminist liturgist has many opportunities for reinterpretation, reconstruction, and innovation.<sup>22</sup> Women's voices and perspective were first expressed in *haggadot* compiled for use in women-only seders, privately circulated and passed hand-to-hand from woman to woman.<sup>23</sup> Later, gender-inclusive *haggadot*, written for mixed communities, began to appear.<sup>24</sup> In many non-Orthodox households, the following correctives have become a part of the Passover ritual: the "four sons" have become the "four children"; Miriam, Yoheved, the mid-

wives Shifra and Puah, and Pharaoh's daughter are acknowledged as central to the telling of the Exodus story; an enumeration of contemporary plagues includes an acknowledgment of women's historic invisibility in Jewish history and silence in the seder ritual; the central narrative of the ritual (*maggid*) now includes the stories of women throughout Jewish history, or rewrites the ritual through women's eyes; and the traditional *hallel*, or praise portion, has been expanded with contemporary women's poetry to complement the traditional psalms.<sup>25</sup>

#### COALITION BUILDING

Historically, Jewish women have connected to other women in many of the contexts and cultures in which Jews have lived. Today, however, building coalitions between women across the chasm of differences demands a particular intention and commitment.

In *Deborah, Golda, and Me: Being Female and Jewish in America*, Letty Cottin Pogrebin relates a dream/fantasy of standing up in front of a "huge feminist conference" where "an increasingly rancorous debate between African-American women and Jewish women" is brewing. She imagines herself quoting words of Sojourner Truth, delivered at the Women's Convention of 1851, "Ain't I a Woman?," appealing to the commonalities between women as a more powerful force than their differences.<sup>26</sup> Her fantasy is grounded in the history of American Jewish women, who have often taken the lead in building and maintaining coalitions between women across the barriers of religion, class, and race. Recent scholarship has begun to explore Jewish women's participation in movements for social change in this country and in England.<sup>27</sup>

In small circles and in larger groups, Jewish women continue to reach out to other women, to talk, to share common concerns, and to form coalitions that reach beyond the barriers of race, religion, and culture. There are a number of such examples in cities across the country. In preparation for the 1985 mid-decade conference for International Women's Decade, the writer E. M. Broner and Palestinian Anina Rahman met regularly in New York, and once they arrived in Nairobi they worked together to create a dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian delegates. In *Deborah, Golda and Me*, Pogrebin describes her efforts to build trust and to bring together the personal and political in Black-Jewish dialogue in New York. In St. Louis, Missouri, Rabbi Susan Talve initiated an interfaith women's clergy dialogue where Jewish,



Christian, and Muslim religious leaders come together to share common concerns and to strengthen one another as change agents.

The interfaith Women's Coalition Against Ethnic Cleansing was established in Los Angeles in December 1992 by representatives of the Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish communities following press revelations about Serbian rape camps and the use of rape as a weapon of genocide and war in former Yugoslavia. Following the lead of the religious representatives, over twenty community women's organizations banded together to speak out and take action on behalf of the victims of the atrocities in Bosnia-Herzegovina with a specific focus on acts of violence against women. In the first year after its creation, the coalition implemented campaigns to raise awareness, lobby, and raise substantial funds for direct relief. Two delegations of rape crisis workers and others traveled to the war zone, carrying medical supplies, essential clothing and personal items, and funds for grassroots women's support services. Women Against Gun Violence, another interfaith, interethnic coalition of women in Los Angeles, was also catalyzed by the work of Jewish women. The group, which includes representatives from fifty women's organizations in Los Angeles, works with antigun and firearm control groups nationwide to educate people about the dangers of firearms and to eliminate gun violence from our society.<sup>28</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Jewish women are no longer silent, and women's voices are transforming Judaism. Over the course of the last twenty years, Jewish women across the world have begun to come out of the kitchen and the nursery and out from behind the *mehitza* (curtain that separates sexes in a traditional synagogue) to claim the classroom, the study hall, and the synagogue as their rightful domains. The texts, the liturgy, and the rituals that have defined Judaism have begun to be transformed by the addition of women's voices on the page and in the pew. Changes that began in liberal Jewish communities have reverberated through the most traditional communities, and women are now taking leadership roles that until recently were reserved for men. Women's voices, now raised, will not be silenced. The new song of which the psalmist speaks is the song that includes *all* voices. Jewish women are demonstrating that this song, a song of inclusion and hope, is the song that will heal the world.

#### NOTES

1. *The Memoirs of Gluckel of Hameln*, trans. Marvin Lowenthal, with an introduction by Robert S. Rosen (New York: Schocken Books, 1977).
2. See Szold's lead article, "What Our Grandmothers Read," in the 5 April 1907 *Hebrew Standard*. Her impressive erudition and thoughtful analysis evoked little response.
3. Bernadette J. Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue* (Chico, Ca.: Scholar's Press, 1982). See also Hannah Safrai, "Women and the Ancient Synagogue," in *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue*, ed. Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1992), 39-49.
4. See Sondra Henry and Emily Taitz, eds., *Written Out of History: Our Jewish Foremothers* (New York: Biblio Press, 1988), 139-143, and Cecil Roth, *The House of Nasi: Dona Gracia* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1948).
5. See *The Memoirs of Gluckel of Hameln*.
6. See Marion A. Kaplan, "Bertha Pappenheim: Founder of German-Jewish Feminism," in *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*, ed. Elizabeth Koltun (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 149-63.
7. See Ellen Umansky, *Lily Montague and the Advancement of Liberal Judaism: From Vision to Vocation* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984); Faith Rogow, *Gone to Another Meeting: The National Council of Jewish Women, 1893-1993* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993); and Joan Dash, *Summoned to Jerusalem: The Life of Henrietta Szold* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979). For a more detailed historical study of the precursors of women in the rabbinate, see Ellen Umansky, "Women in Judaism: From the Reform Movement to Contemporary Jewish Religious Feminism," in *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 334-54.
8. The first reform prayer book was the *Hamburg Temple Prayer Book*, published in 1818. In 1854 Abraham Geiger compiled a prayer book that was "regarded as highly authoritative." It was followed in America by Isaac Mayer Wise's *Minhag America* (1857) and David Einhorn's *Olat Tamid* (1858). See Abraham Millgram, *Jewish Worship* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1971), 583-86.
9. See Alpert and Milgram's chapter in this book. See also Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), 121ff.
10. Marcia Falk, "Notes On Composing New Blessings," in *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, ed. Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 128-38; see also Marcia Falk, *The Book of Blessings: New Jewish Prayers and Rituals for Daily Life, the Sabbath, and the New Moon Festival* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).
11. See Alpert and Milgram's chapter in this volume.

12. *Or Chadash: New Paths for Shabbat Morning* (Philadelphia: P'na Or Religious Fellowship, 1991), which was edited by a feminist team of women and men, pioneers in providing context and examples for all these innovations.
13. These works were preceded by the groundbreaking collections *Jewish Women: New Perspectives*, ed. Elizabeth Koltun (New York: Schocken Books, 1976) and *On Being A Jewish Feminist*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Schocken Books, 1983). Judith Baskin has edited an outstanding collection of essays that must be included in any serious study of Jewish women's history: *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991). Paula E. Hyman's recent *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995) models how our understanding of Jewish history changes when gender is factored into the analysis.
14. Blu Greenberg, "Feminism Within Orthodoxy: A Revolution of Small Signs," *Lilith* (Summer 1992): 11-17.
15. See Greenberg.
16. In addition to the works mentioned above, the work of Rachel Adler, published as essays in periodicals and collections, is crucial for understanding the feminist critique of *halakhah*.
17. Greenberg, 16-17.
18. Tradition teaches that boys attain religious and legal maturity at the age of thirteen, and girls at age twelve. See also Alpert and Milgram, in this volume, and Barbara Goldin, *Bat Mitzvah* (New York: Morrow, 1995).
19. A full treatment of this document can be found in Adler's forthcoming *Engendering Judaism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society).
20. Savina Teubal's *simchat hochma* ritual is included in Ellen Umansky and Dianne Ashton, eds., *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 257-65.
21. Selected rituals are available from the American Jewish Congress Feminist Center, 6505 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 417, Los Angeles, CA 90048; the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Church Road and Greenwood Avenue, Wyncote, PA 19095; or the Jewish Women's Resource Center, 9 East 69th Street, New York, NY 10021. See Rebecca Alpert's excellent essay "Exploring Jewish Women's Rituals," *Bridges* 2/1 (Spring 1991), 66-80; Debra Orenstein, ed., *Lifecycles: Jewish Women on Life Passages and Personal Milestones* (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights, 1994); and Rela Geffen, ed., *Celebration and Renewal: Rites of Passage in Judaism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993).
22. See Lee T. Bycel, "'To Reclaim our Voice': An Analysis of Representative Contemporary Feminist Passover Haggadot," *CCAR Journal: A Reform Jewish Quarterly* (Spring 1993): 55-71.
23. *The San Diego Women's Haggadah* (Women's Institute for Continuing Jewish Education, 1986) was one of the first to be available beyond a circumscribed locality. E. M. Broner's *The Telling* (San Francisco: HarperCollins,

- 1992) is the first feminist *haggadah* to be published by a mainstream publishing company.
24. See, for example, the *haggadot* compiled by Dov ben Khayyim, *The Telling: A Loving Hagadah for Passover* (Oakland, Ca.: Rakhamim Publications, 1983); New Jewish Agenda, *The Shalom Seders: Three Haggadahs* (New York: Adama Books, 1984); and Richard N. Levy, *On Wings of Freedom: The Hillel Haggadah for the Nights of Passover* (Hoboken, N.J.: B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundations in association with Ktav Publishing House, 1989).
25. See V'Hayinu Kulanu Shama: *And We Were All There* (Los Angeles: American Jewish Congress Feminist Center, 1993).
26. Letty Cottin Pogrebin, *Deborah, Golda and Me: Being Female and Jewish in America* (New York: Crown Books, 1991), 275.
27. See, for example two excellent studies: Linda Gordon Kuzmack, *Woman's Cause: The Jewish Woman's Movement in England and the United States, 1881-1933* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990); and Faith Rogow, *Gone to Another Meeting: The National Council of Jewish Women, 1893-1993* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992).
28. For further information on these coalitions, contact the American Jewish Congress, 6505 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 417, Los Angeles, CA 90048.