

## Voices of Orthodox Judaism and feminism show there can be room for compromise in areas that seem to lack common ground.

Maybe it is enough to note that the organizers planned a conference for 450 people and that well over 1,000 came. Maybe it is enough to report the high proportion of attendees under 30.

But such facts only hint at the powerful impression made by the international conference on Orthodox Judaism and feminism held last Sunday and Monday in Manhattan.

For many in the growing ranks of the militantly Orthodox, feminism is about as kosher as bacon.

Orthodox Jews, who make up less than 10 percent of the American Jewish population, separate women from men in the synagogue and has sharply restricted women's public roles in religion. Women have commonly been discouraged from pursuing the same kind of religious learning as men as well as from pursuing goals outside the home.

Defended in the name of Jewish law, or halacha, these restrictions are said to stem from a high regard for feminine modesty and a respect for God-given distinctions in roles for men and women, distinctions that fully recognize the value and power of women, especially in the home and in raising children.

To Jewish critics of these restrictions, such justifications are a form of apologetics, rationalizations for an inherited, unjust, system with barriers to women's spiritual fulfillment.

Among Jewish women generally, of course, feminism has had a ready audience. Susan Weidman Schneider, the editor of *Lilith*, a Jewish feminist journal, gave an important reason in January when the magazine celebrated its 20th anniversary with a panel discussion at the 92d Street Y

in Manhattan. Ms. Weidman Schneider pointed out that the 1990 study of the Jewish population in the United States, better known for finding high rates of intermarriage, also found that almost two-thirds of Jewish women 20 to 45 years old had college degrees, compared with fewer than 12 percent among other white American women of those ages.

Orthodox Jewish women have not been untouched by this outcome of the ingrained respect for learning, or by other factors leading up to this week's conference. More and more Orthodox girls are being exposed to classical Jewish learning both here and in periods of study in Israel, and new institutes are being established that allow women to pursue these studies to the furthest degree.

Rituals like baby-naming ceremonies that welcome girls into the Jewish community in a manner parallel to the circumcision of male infants are increasingly accepted among Orthodox Jews. Bas mitzvahs marking the passage of 12- or 13-year-old girls into religious adulthood are now the practice in most Orthodox families.

A growing core of Orthodox Jewish women now participate in the kind of women's prayer groups that a Queens rabbinical association proliferated last month because they feature women publicly reading from the Torah, the first five books of Hebrew Scripture.

All these factors went into the intense religious seriousness of the conference on Orthodoxy and feminism, which was chaired by the author Blu Greenberg and organized by a committee of women from the United States, Israel and several other

er nations.

The one red thread of anger running through the discussions focused largely on the plight of separated or civilly divorced Orthodox women who are religiously forbidden to remarry or even seek prospective partners because their husbands refuse to give them a "get," the divorce document that husbands alone can provide, or withhold.

But unlike many other gatherings of religious feminists, this one gave a prominent place to rabbis and other male authorities, a presence that reflected a common theme of the conference: the boundaries of women's participation in Orthodox Jewish life have to be stretched not only for the sake of women but for men and the enrichment of Judaism generally.

The meeting was notable for its seriousness about Jewish learning and tradition. No one denied that modern feminism had arisen outside Judaism, but the premise was that it had to be tested and incorporated within the framework of halacha.

At the same time, that framework was not considered fixed and unbendable. The rabbis and the women among the scholars gave numerous examples of the past adaptations that they said had maintained the relevance of Jewish law over centuries of social change.

One result of this constant dialectic between old and new was the airing of compromise proposals. It was suggested, for example, that the barrier dividing the women's section in an Orthodox synagogue from the men's, the mechitzah, could be maintained if the women's section enjoyed the same visual and physical access to ritual actions as the men's section had instead of being tucked into a balcony or limited to the rear or side areas.

Likewise, on the question of rabbinical ordination, several speakers suggested that the tasks now carried out by Orthodox rabbis could be differentiated and women be autho-

rized, under titles other than rabbi, to carry out many, although perhaps not all, of them.

Many at the conference looked forward to the recognized emergence of women acting as decisors, offering learned opinions on contested matters in Jewish law. This development, they said, would gradually add women's perspectives to the body of interpretation.

Certainly, the power of learning was much in evidence among the women who spoke. When Tamar Ross, who teaches at Bar Ilan University in Jerusalem as well as at a women's yeshiva or secondary school in Jerusalem, school, came to the podium, her female students in the audience rose to honor her in the way that aspiring male scholars long recognized their masters.

Ms. Weidman Schneider noted how Professor Ross had delivered her remarks, avoiding personal asides as she plunged directly into a demanding argument "with the same candor and tonality as a male authority."

Her talk, proposed a theory that throughout Jewish history there has been a succession of revelations or "hearings" of the voice of God at Sinai, an evolutionary process that enlarged and even reconfigured the Torah without ever surrendering the original heritage to what Rabbi Irving Greenberg, in a similarly far-reaching analysis, later called "the arrogance of modernity."

Some women from the more traditional sectors of Orthodox Jewry said that the conference's feminism, although eye-opening, left them feeling like outsiders. And some far less traditional women expressed impatience with the conference's careful insistence on religious continuity.

Still, the gathering demonstrated that the most moving and convincing testimony to the power and profundity of a religious tradition often comes from those most energetically struggling with it.