

A Modern Woman Confronts Traditional Judaism

by Rachel Landsberg

Growing up within a small Reform congregation, I was instilled with a positive Jewish identity and a feeling of belonging to a community. During college, although I felt good about being Jewish, I also felt that my Jewish education was only rudimentary. I actively sought out to learn more about Judaism and to find a place for myself within the Jewish world. After spending time in Israel, immersed in learning, community, and Shabbat observance, I found what I was looking for within traditional Judaism: the opportunity to grow from a passive recipient to an active seeker of Jewish learning and a "doer" of Judaism.

Jewish learning has consistently played a central role in my life. Being engaged in Torah study, particularly through the model of *chevruta*, or partnership learning, has offered me the means with which to struggle to find meaning as well as relevance within the text, to build my own relationship to the text, and to find my own voice within our tradition. Being a part of a community of learners, where ideas are exchanged, discussed, and challenged, brings me closer to others and helps me to clarify my own beliefs. It is within the more traditional models of Jewish learning that I have found intellectual seriousness as well as a high level of study. I have encountered learners who are firmly committed to Judaism, yet also struggle in a deep way to understand the texts.

Being part of a *davening* community has also profoundly deepened my connection to Judaism and to God. I am part of what I consider to be an extraordinary *minyán*, where we not only come together to pray, but we participate in community service programs, learn together, have Shabbat meals together and spend time with each other socially. Our *tefila* itself is participatory, spirited, and serious. Although one person is leading the *davening*, we all participate by *davening* on our own, singing together and listening intently during Torah reading, which allows for both personal and communal prayer. We reach out to the new faces within our community, offering hospitality for meals and encouraging everyone's involvement

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in our activities. And we reach out beyond our own community through our community service projects. Being observant within a community offers a framework within which to mark life-cycle events; it is remarkable to watch the ways in which my community has supported and nurtured mourners as well as celebrated with unmitigated happiness births and marriages.

As a feminist, it has been critical for me to find an expression of Judaism that seeks to find places for women within Jewish ritual and learning. I struggle consistently with ways to reconcile my feminist values with a *halachic* approach to Judaism; I only remain within traditional Judaism because I feel that there are ways to reconcile those differences. I have been fortunate to study at places that have offered women equal opportunity to study texts. I have been inspired by my female teachers and peers and by their seriousness with which they engage in the study of Torah, Talmud, and *halacha*. Similarly, I have found that my *davening* community struggles in a meaningful and committed way to find opportunities to include women in rituals within the framework of *halacha*.

I am drawn to *halacha* for several reasons. I feel compelled to see *halacha* as binding based on my understanding of the Torah. I am consistently fascinated by the way *halacha* functions and the way it has evolved. Lastly, *halacha* offers me ways to bring Judaism, God, and spirituality into every aspect of my life — saying blessings before I eat, seeing Shabbat as the culmination of my week, finding the time on a daily basis to pray to God. ✨

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