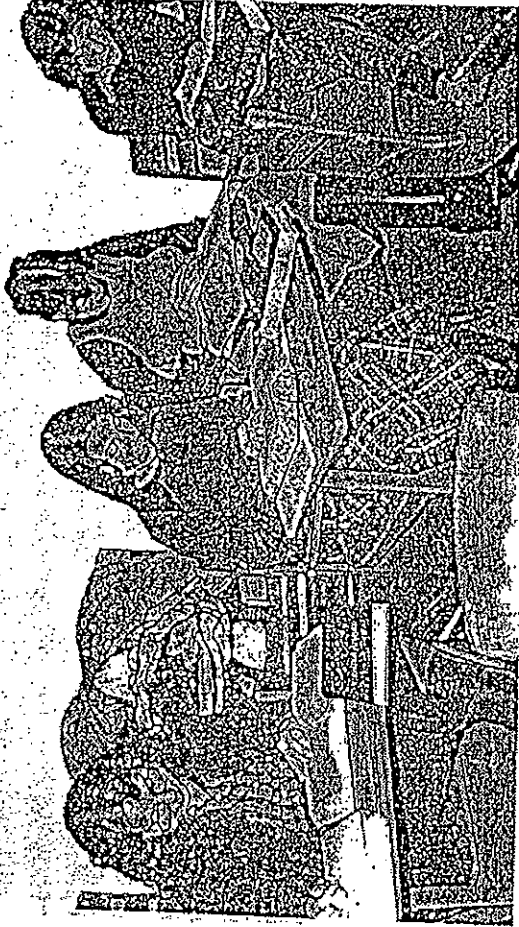


Feminist Orthodoxy

Strident or ambivalent, staunch feminists or closet conservatives, they came



By MICHELE BERMAN

What does a feminist Orthodox woman (or is it Orthodox feminist?) look like? Is she wearing corduroy slacks, a button-down Gap shirt and a wool beret? Or is she clothed in a flowing tea-length skirt, matching blouse and floppy denim hat? Or better yet, does she wear the staid, to-the-ankle-and-wrist dress and top it off with a *sheitel*? Judging from the hundreds of women who attended the first-ever International Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy held at Manhattan's Grand Hyatt Hotel Sunday and Monday, feminist Orthodoxy wears many hats, betraying a variety of attitudes and degrees of religious observance.

Held one week after the Queens Vaad of Rabbis condemned women's prayer groups, the backbone of the feminist Orthodoxy movement, the Conference gave a forum to some 700 women and men who hope, someday, to see their movement become an accepted part of mainstream Orthodoxy. But women's *tefillah*, or prayer groups, are only symptoms of larger questions increasingly raised regarding Orthodox women.

The major concern for some at the conference was the pressure of trying to balance Orthodoxy with other facets of their lives.

"I find that my Jewish faith has really suffered," said Shelley Frier List, a participant in an over-crowded workshop entitled: "The Orthodox Superwoman—Balancing Faith, Family and Career"—"I keep telling myself this is a temporary situation, but I'm still in that dark part of the tunnel."

In the workshop, women sat Indian style on the floor in a packed

conference room to discuss the stresses exclusive to an Orthodox career woman. One superwoman's cellular phone kept ringing, as if to prove the workshop's validity.

When the arguing reached too high a level, one woman piped in, "There is no *mechitza* here. Let us not separate from each other," revealing both the desire for togetherness and the wide range of sometimes opposing views that women brought to the conference. (The *mechitza* is the curtain separating men from women in an Orthodox shul.)

Not all the participants were comfortable being called feminists. "Secular feminism has really taken over the Orthodox's view of an *esther/chayil*!" complained one young woman, referring to traditional views of what makes a "righteous woman" in the Orthodox community. The woman said she was hearing a lot of negativity concerning motherhood in the Orthodox context, which she has always perceived as a "beautiful thing."

The woman showed great con-

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cern for the economic struggles characteristic of many Orthodox families, especially when they must pay to send several children to yeshiva. "We have all these expenses that are really unique to the Orthodox family," said one beot-clad woman, who called, amid cheers, for some kind of communal help.

In another sardine-packed auditorium, Rabbi David Silber, founder of Manhattan's Drisha Institute, where women can study Talmud and other texts, was at the receiving end of a veritable firing range. Gasps were heard as one woman asked his personal opinion on female rabbis. How would a graduate of an Orthodox rabbinical seminary answer such a heated question with diplomacy and sensitivity, without getting his suit dirtied by flying tomatoes?

"I have no problem, per se, with women rabbis," he answered. "I have a problem with rabbis in general, to tell you the truth." Amid laughter, Silber said the role of rabbis should be redefined so they are seen more as educators. His answer was cheered by the audience.

Silber offered his opinion of what the Jewish community should do for women by focusing on education. "There has to be a place where if a woman wants to learn and be great—she can be great. We need more places like Drisha, willing to take risks, to make a statement," he said. "We need a place where a woman can become an expert—can become, eventually, a resource for the entire Jewish people. In my view, only a fully educated woman can be a major player in the shaping of where the Jewish people are going to go."

Silber was empathetic to the lack of a career track for learned Orthodox women. For him, he explained, it was easy: he went to Yeshiva University and received *smicha*, rabbinical ordination. But, for learned women, who participate in programs like his Scholars Circle, and who have the drive and desire for a formal position similar to rabbinical status, there is no formal degree. "The women who study for three years at Drisha are taking risks," said Silber. "There is no obvious track for them. We have to create that path—many paths—for them. These people want to serve and we have to give them that opportunity."

Silber also called for a "reinvigoration" of the day school system for both boys and girls, and for the creation of Jewish studies curricula that allow girls as well as boys to learn such subjects as Talmud. "In my view, they should get exactly the same education, not because the girl doesn't learn make that much difference. Frankly, the boys leaving the high schools today don't



Rabbi David Silber uses the Drisha Institute to implement his vision of women becoming highly educated in Jewish law.

know Talmud, either," Silber told the conference. But, he continued, "if the message is sent to the girl that there's something that she can't study—that's what's so damaging. The message we should give to our kids is every book has to be open."

Noa Jeselsohn, a participant in Drisha's Scholar Circle, was one of the women who argued for recognizing the word "feminist," because of all its connotations. According to Jeselsohn, "feminist"

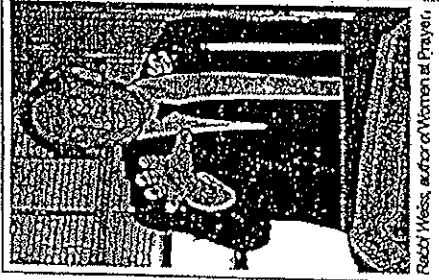
"Learning Torah is the key to leadership. Saying women can't do that, considering their leadership position in the secular world, is absurd," she said.

Jeselsohn called the Vaad of Queens ruling on women's prayer groups "counterproductive," and said, "personally, I don't think they have their finger on the pulse of the community." Though Jeselsohn accepts halachic boundaries, such as a woman's obligation to hear the Torah reading by a minyan of men, she said, "I see women as wanting to participate in community shuls, but in many respects our shuls don't accommodate women or let them participate in ways they would be halachically allowed to."

Eli Thier did not grow up religious but is now an Israeli *boaz yeshiva*, newly Orthodox, who has started her first year at Drisha and agrees with Jeselsohn. Thier insisted that there is no conflict between feminism and faith: "I don't see it as contradiction. Women becoming more of an active participant in Jewish culture is an unfolding of something Divine. What I see as happening is we're simply realizing a certain Divine will."

"I have nothing but hope," Thier continued. "Change is part of Jewish tradition. I don't think this feminism is a big deviation, just a part of culture."

Despite Thier's optimism, she admits to the difficulties of living a dual life. "It's incredibly hard and confusing, especially coming from a secular background, but the more religious I became, the more feminist values became important to me," she explained. "I'm happy putting those [problems] on a shelf for the most part. Ultimately, I don't think Halacha tolerates revolution, but Halacha demands evolution. There's an element of patience and faith. I've sat in synagogues and cried, but I have faith that what's right will unfold." □



Rabbi Weiss, author of Women at Prayer.

means that a woman's voice matters, and that women's creative and religious expressions should be respected. But is even this limited definition of feminism defensible within an Orthodox framework? Yes, Jeselsohn insisted.

"For most Orthodox feminists, religion is something they believe in. On a certain level, the option is not to leave the religion."

Jeselsohn said that Orthodox and *Halacha*, or rabbinic law, are fundamental components in her life: "I was brought up Orthodox. I have a bottom-line belief in Halacha." She believes that constructions that limit women in Orthodoxy arise from sociological considerations rather than halachic ones.