

NEW YORK

# Gen Xers Take Orthodox Feminist Reins

*Modesty, mikveh and sex: New generation makes its own experience the focus at conference.*

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In 1979, at the tail end of a decade that awakened the first Orthodox feminists, Idana Goldberg was a third grader at the Yeshivah of Flatbush. At the age of 8, she sometimes wore a sweatshirt her parents gave her, its cotton fabric emblazoned with a popular slogan of the time: "Never Underestimate the Power of a Woman."

In the years that followed, Goldberg made good on the sweatshirt's warning. She not only went on to the University of Pennsylvania, where she is now pursuing a doctorate in modern Jewish and women's history, but in the year after high school she learned Gemara and other texts at Midreshet Lindenbaum, a women's yeshiva in Jerusalem.

While she's had Jewish educational opportunities that many in her mother's generation could only dream about, she's also struggled with at least one issue many in her mother's generation cast aside as an obsolete custom, but many in hers believe is bound up in Jewish law — the practice of covering one's hair after marriage.

Goldberg is a member of the first generation to reap the rewards of the Orthodox feminists of the '70s. It is a generation that has often been described as stricter in its religious observance than the previous one, and one that has sometimes been criticized for its lack of



Conference chair Pam Scheininger, left, and program chair Idana Goldberg come of age in a world in which Orthodox feminism had already made its mark. RICHARD LEVINE

interest in activism.

But now, in a changing of the guard that will relieve those who worry about feminism's fate in the hands of Gen Xers, Goldberg, 30, and Pam Scheininger, 27, will be running the show Sunday at the daylong conference of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, "2001:

JOFA In Progress."

"I'm not putting myself into the old-age home on these issues, but it is so wonderful to feel the mission is being taken up by the next generation of very smart women committed to halacha and imbued with feminist values," says Blu Greenberg, JOFA president. Greenberg

says this group has built on the hard work of those who organized previous conferences. But after attending a planning meeting run by this committee — where in addition to Scheininger serving as chair and Goldberg as program chair, more than half of the organizers are women under 35 — Greenberg reported to the JOFA board members: "They're so extraordinary."

"For some of us who have been in this for 20 or 30 years, we're really learning new things," says Greenberg. "They're looking at some of the issues that we dealt with in an altogether new way. A new generation is taking responsibility for moving Orthodoxy forward as we negotiate the impasses between how the tradition defines women and our understanding of what constitutes equality and women's equal dignity."

The conference, to be held at Columbia University's Robert K. Kraft Center for Jewish Student Life, is planned on a smaller scale than the previous three international conferences held at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Manhattan. Designed as an interim meeting between the larger conferences, it is also being run with a different format and focus than past gatherings, in part reflective of the interests of the young organizers.

The program includes several provocative topics that have never been broached before, including a session on "Lesbianism and the Orthodox Community," two discussions of "Sexuality: What We Do, How We Feel" as well as

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a conversation on "God is a Man of War."

It is a conference that turns its focus from the lecturers to the participants themselves, encouraging attendees to spend most of the session in public conversation. The subjects stressed are those participants know through first-hand experience. In addition to the two conversations on sexuality, there are two on mikveh, two others on modesty and self-image and one on Anita Diamant's popular novel, "The Red Tent."

On the flip side, there is only one session which explores the glass ceiling, a subject in which the discussion could range across a vast landscape of new women's roles, from the *toanot*, the women pleaders of Israeli rabbinical courts; to the new halachic advisers of sexual matters in Israel; to the apparent lack of interest in the new positions of congregational interns here; to the handful of Orthodox women who have received rabbinical ordination or are currently studying toward it.

Notably, the conference also doesn't touch on the issue of women's *tefilla*, services in which women worship separately from men, and play a greater role. In an American Jewish Committee study by Sylvia Barrack Fishman, published last year, this innovation was found to be particularly unpopular among younger women.

Scheininger, the conference chair, noted the importance of delving into topics that too often go unexplored. She spoke of a good friend who left the Orthodox fold and soon noticed that outside of the community, people talk about sex. "When there are problems they discuss them. I said, 'Wow, that's amazing.'"

In her circles, sex is rarely discussed even among friends, says Scheininger. That's "not good for us. It's not good for our marriages."

The profile of the young women on the

committee challenges some conclusions reached in the AJCommittee study.

Both Scheininger, a lawyer for the Legal Aid Society, and Goldberg proudly call themselves feminists. They admit their feminism is not driven by women's *tefilla* or helping *agunot*, women trapped in bad marriages by husbands who refuse to grant them a religious divorce. "These issues are crucial and important, but there are other ways of being an Orthodox feminist," says Goldberg.

Both women strove to incorporate feminist elements into their Orthodox weddings, abandoning their veils, for example, after the *bedeken* ceremony. Both women believe that like household duties, spiritual roles should be shared. At Shabbat meals in their homes, the wives say HaMotzi, the blessing over challah; the husbands say the Kiddush over wine.

Naomi Mark, who at 41 was among the older organizers, said she was impressed by the confidence of the committee members, perhaps owing to their high level of Jewish education. "They were ready to push the envelope, to charge forward," she said.

The shift in the balance of generations wasn't intentional, according to Greenberg, who says she appointed Scheininger because of her competence, and asked her to create a conference committee. Scheininger turned to friends, many of whom worship at Kehilat Orach Eliezer, a postdenominational synagogue on the Upper West Side, and many of whom have studied with her at Drisha, an Upper West Side institute that teaches Jewish text to women.

The conference, says Scheininger, "is not intended to be a series of lectures, or text-based study sessions." The goal, she says, is "to walk out with a better JOFA, an organization that's more dynamic and responsive" — for women of every generation. □