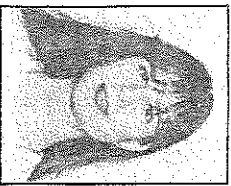


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If only it had been called "Women and Orthodoxy"

To say that the recent International Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy evoked a rush of conflicting emotions and a healthy dose of inner turmoil would be an understatement. I suspect that all women who attended, in some way, struggle with the pull of the two movements, at times compatible and at times not.

And even for those who weren't in the thousand-plus crowd, the conference caused much debate, speculation, reflection, and even regret. As one friend who chose not to attend told me, "If only they had called it 'Women and Orthodoxy, I would have gone.'" Coming from a bright, well-educated woman who is not reticent to fulfill her professional potential, this statement is very telling. It's illustrative of the

hesitancy among some young women, who, ironically, are more literate in Jewish texts than any generation before them. And why should they affiliate with feminism? The activism of our mothers, both in general society, in the Jewish community, and within Orthodoxy, has made it possible, even praiseworthy for young,

observant women to attend medical school without identifying themselves as trailblazing women. And given the negative connotation the Orthodox community has ascribed to feminism, the quiet approach is appealing.

I understand my friend's statement because I, too, struggle with the movement. How much need I agree with to affiliate? Need the approach of some of the most vocal spokeswomen be consonant

with mine? What if I am more grounded in the totality of Jewish ritual than some in the older generation?

I struggle when I don't feel the need to join a woman's prayer group, however halachic. If truth be told, I am even uncomfortable in such a setting, whether for theological or sociological reasons (I suspect that it's the latter, sometimes conched in the terms of the former).

I struggle when I hear the bitterness toward and the lack of proper reverence for the rabbinic establishment. Change is best effected, I believe, under an inclusive approach. When Rabbi Avi Weiss, a longtime champion of the need to heed women's calls within the tradition, said it was harmful to the cause to call for

K'vod habrit, respect for G-d's creatures, while at the same time denigrating K'vod harabanut, respect for the rabbinata, he took a beating from the audience. One woman in particular, whose pain and anger was discernible in the very intonation of her question, if not in its content, did not hesitate to defend her hostility.

I struggle when I see that too many in the Orthodox feminist crowds are not as zealous in their commitment to the mitzvot as their liberal views would demand. For while I, too, am very attracted to progressive ideas, I believe that they lose a fair measure of credibility if unaccompanied by strict observance.

And sadly, I even feel a flicker of the struggle when I encounter patronizing and disapproving atti-

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ence called her four-year ordeal, filled with exertion and acrimony, a "psychological rape."

I affiliate when I hear Orthodox scholar Tamar Ross, not a hair showing from under her old-style babushka, speak of "successive revelations" as a theological model that can encompass both the fundamentals of feminism and the axiomatic view of Torah M'Sinat, the divine nature of the Torah.

I affiliate when I see increasing numbers of girls and women learning Jewish texts on a level previously unavailable to them. It is these young, bright women who will be most influential in shaping Orthodoxy. Equipped with solid knowledge of the halachic system and how it operates, they are most qualified to mold the direction of women's roles within Orthodoxy. To me, a strong education in the totality of Jewish literature is the supreme goal, for that is what can and does allow women to participate fully in the beauty of Judaism.

I affiliate when I hear about nascent halachic options that allow women to channel their knowledge and commitment, such as a program in Israel that trains women to become toanot, pleaders in a religious court, and another that allows women to become poskanot, religious decisors, in matters relating to the laws of family purity. Endorsed by an increasing number of Orthodox rabbis, these options will no doubt grow, and in so doing, meet the needs of scores of observant women.

Despite my conflicting struggles, or better yet, precisely because of them, I felt comfortable at the conference. Those who expected (I certainly did) a monolithic crowd were proved wrong. There were young women who dropped off their babies in the daycare provided by the conference organizers, and there were grandmothers. There were women wearing berets, women sporting stichels, and women without head coverings. There were women wearing skirts and women wearing pants. There were women from across the United States, Canada, England, and Israel. And, not least of all, there were men.

The diversity was not limited to externals. Among the participants, there were more militant women, whose approach reflected a deep sense of pain and abandonment from the powers-that-be in Orthodoxy, and there were the more genteel type, such as the young scholar who characterized her feminism as one of inclusion and conciliation.

Perhaps the most telling image was one that was so eclectic, it appeared dichotomous, what some early feminists might have labeled the suffocating residual effect of a patriarchal society and their critics may have termed women's nature: the same hat-clad woman who diligently organized the all-women prayer services—a not-so-benign activity in these parts—used mealtime to catch up on her needlepointing. And that image, perhaps more than any other, captured the essence of the conference.

The conference did not pigeon-

hole any woman, nor did it call for a conformity of approach, focus, or belief. The only comfortingly demanded, and rightly so, I believe, was one of passion for the tradition. Puntilious observance and religious commitment are the sine qua non for the progress of women in my community, much as they are for the success of any enterprise within Orthodoxy.

So perhaps I need not accept the whole package of Orthodox feminism nor agree with all of its spokeswomen in order to subscribe to its goals. My own views are dynamic, hopefully moving in a linear way, sometimes nudged by the tradition and sometimes nudged by my gender. But my operational base, as an Orthodox woman, is, as it must be, the halachic system.

Some years ago, while in four-ness school, I wrote a highly reactionary essay on feminism and Orthodoxy. On a mission to defend the honor of my community to my classmates who thought it anachronistic, I felt I had to show that Orthodoxy had little need for feminism. Then, my tone was authoritative. Now, it is questioning, not of the fundamentals of our tradition, but precisely of the vast untapped opportunities available to women within those axioms. ♦

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tudes, words, or even just looks from those who neither share nor respect my feminist views. The looks are the worst; it's as if they say, "Don't tell me you're one of them," the "them" being a group of demonized women whom they have certainly never met nor known in any significant way. In a close-knit society, one shouldn't underestimate the desire to conform.

Yes, for every factor that separates me from some elements in the Orthodox feminist movement, there is another that joins me to it. I affiliate when I hear the anguish in the voice of an agunah, a woman whose husband won't grant her a religious divorce, effectively barring her from remarrying. One former agunah at the confer-

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