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*A turning point in the history of
Orthodox Jewish women*

International Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy

by NAOMI GROSSMAN

There was already a buzz in the air by the time Blu Greenberg, a well-known Orthodox feminist and one of the organizers of the conference, stepped up to the podium at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in New York this past February to welcome participants to the first International Conference on Orthodoxy and Feminism.

Many of those participants were women who had just said their morning prayer services in a women's prayer group, some for the first time, and were feeling the power of leading a ritual rather than following along. But it was the sheer numbers of women — many of whom were forced to lean against walls or double up in seats, with the overflow spilling out of the ballroom — that clearly demonstrated that this attempt to combine seemingly opposing beliefs was blossoming into a fledgling movement. The passion these Orthodox women feel about their religious roles had apparently been underestimated; and the range of women sitting side by side in that room — some in jeans, some in suits, some wearing *sheitels* (wigs), some wearing berets — proved that this feeling was found in all the different sectors of Orthodoxy. Each woman was sitting in that room listening to the words of Blu Greenberg for the same reason.

That reason, to be able to integrate their belief in Torah and *halacha* with their deeply held feminist ideologies, brought women not only from more liberal New York Orthodox Jewish communities such as Riverdale, Teaneck and the Upper West Side but also women from the more traditionally Orthodox neighborhoods of Borough Park and Monsey as well as women from Portland, St. Louis, Baltimore and Israel. It impelled mothers to bring their daughters, wives to bring their husbands, and even a few men to come on their own.

"This [conference] was something we've wanted to do for a long time," said Greenberg, "but we felt that now the time was right. There is so much more going on with the tremendous growth in the amount of Orthodox women learning and the expansion of the women's prayer groups. We had a sense that there were these isolated individuals out there and it was time to bring them together."

Judging from the fact that the anticipated 450 participants swelled to over



Photos by Joan Roth

a thousand in the first few hours of the conference and from the response of those attendees, it seems that their hunch was correct.

"I've had feelings that women weren't being represented fairly in the Orthodox community," said Chevie Shurin, a twenty-four-year-old Orthodox physical therapist from Brooklyn. "I wanted to hear how the issue was being addressed and how it can be reconciled with the Torah." Shurin added that these issues are relevant for the ultra-Orthodox woman as well as for her more modern counterpart. "Many Orthodox women might not think about these things, but for those that do, this conference speaks to them."

Indeed, when Greenberg spoke of the two world views of the Orthodox feminist — and of her determination to stay within her community and struggle to integrate those views — the vigorous nods and the knowing smiles from the audience seemed to be gestures of relief. For many, their struggles was finally being validated. Their ostensible attempts to disrupt the perfectly nice, ordered traditional ways — by insisting their daughters have a bat mitzvah or by attending the women's prayer group that their community rabbi might have spoken out against or by demanding that a high-level class in Talmud be open to women as well as



see what is going on within the community of Orthodox Jewish women," agreed Amira Rosenberg, age twenty-five, an Orthodox mother of one in Sharon, Massachusetts, with a master's degree in religious studies. "I think it is important to get women together to recognize each other's needs."

Just what those needs are was also an issue. Some of the women attending the conference had very tangible goals. They wanted it made clear that Jewish law allowed them to be able to lead prayer services, don *tallit* and *tefillin*

grant them a *get* (Jewish divorce), making it *halachically* impermissible for these women to remarry or have children. Stories were told of men using their power in the *get* process to extort money from their wives, gain custody of the children, or to reduce child support. Rivka Haut, director of Agunah, an organization which helps women unable to obtain a *get*, took the *batei din* (rabbinical courts) to task for not being responsive to this issue. Quiet recommendations of using violence against the recalcitrant men had come to her from various rabbis but, she asked: "Is that the only way to get a woman a *get*? Can this really be true? More has been written by rabbis about the permissibility of opening bottle caps on shabbat than about freeing *agunot*."

That many activists are born of circumstance was made painfully clear when Judy Becker came up to the podium to speak. A soft spoken young woman from Brooklyn wearing a *sheitel* and a modest, tailored outfit, Becker told of how she left her husband Yehuda after enduring his physical abuse. After two years of his refusal to grant her a *get*, the *beit din* issued a partial excommunication against him, but because it wasn't really enforced by the community he continued to refuse to grant her the *get*. After another two years of waiting, Judy Becker pursued her case in civil court, invoking the 1992 New York State Get law, which allows the judge in a divorce case to consider refusal to grant a *get* as a barrier to remarriage when dividing up the

It's in our power to create change. Judaism is not a spectator sport.

and render decisions on issues of Jewish law. But the needs of others were not yet clearly defined. They had come out of curiosity or to explore the possibilities of pushing traditional boundaries, or they were just starting to realize that they could possibly find more fairness and fulfillment within Orthodox Judaism than they thought. One need was shared by all the attendees: To be taken seriously as a Jew. "The covenant was given to us directly," said Greenberg in her speech. "It was given to us as adults, not children."

There was no issue where the rage at being treated as less than an equal adult was more evident than in that of *agunot* or, literally, "chained women." *Agunot* are women whose husbands refuse to

men — were being vindicated. Greenberg's words and the great numbers and ranges of women sitting in that room told these women what they've been wanting and needing to hear: They were not alone.

"I'd been feeling very alone trying to pursue this religion," said thirty-year-old Shani Berrin of Manhattan, who is a doctoral student in Jewish studies and a mother of three. Her small cap and long flowing skirt could just as easily been the clothes of a SoHo artist as those of a modest Jewish woman. "The biggest focus of my life is Judaism, and I wanted to see how other women dealt with the issue of being successful practitioners of the religion."

"This was a unique opportunity to

assets. Yehuda Becker is challenging the constitutionality of the law and has stated that he will never grant his wife a *get*. "No one wants to get involved," says Becker, "but if he succeeds it will affect many women. If the rabbis wanted to find a *halachic* solution to this they could."

In fact, Rabbi Irwin Haut, who along with his wife is also active in helping *agunot*, did discuss the establishment of a new *beit din* formed specifically to review *agunot* cases. As of the conference, he announced, six *agunot* had been freed by this *beit din* in accordance with Jewish law.

Other announcements made at the conference also gave the sense that changes were looming somewhere on the horizon. Rabbi David Silber, founder and dean of Manhattan's Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, an advanced program of Jewish studies for women, emphasized that real change for women in Orthodox Judaism would only come about through women's Jewish education. Judaic studies should be coeducational, he said, so that girls would learn the same things as boys. "There is nothing magical about *halacha*," he said. "You either know the facts or you don't. The



a woman cannot be ordained as a rabbi, so the issue has become more of a political and social one. One of the speakers at the conference was Haviva Ner-David, who gave a workshop on how women can use *talit* and *tefillin* in their prayers. Ner-David is studying in Jerusalem to receive ordination as an Orthodox rabbi. Still, would she ever be able to be the rabbi of an Orthodox synagogue?

which would train women to be able to perform some of the roles of Orthodox rabbis.

And in an uncharacteristically understated tone, Weiss, a well-known political activist known for his incendiary gestures, also stressed that respect was needed from the more right-wing elements of Orthodoxy. "We need understanding," he said. "They see a women's prayer group as an erosion of *halacha*; we see it as a gateway. *Halacha* is not monolithic."

Weiss's words were clearly in response to the recent series of events in Queens, New York, where the rabbinical council had issued a declaration against a synagogue that was hosting the bat mitzvah of a girl in a women's prayer group, stating that while women's prayer groups might be permissible within *halacha*, they were going against tradition. Ironically, some of the organizers of the conference credit the rabbinical council's decision with the large turnout at the conference. Still, Weiss exhorted the crowd to see their quest as a "joyous one rather than an angry quest."

But for some in the audience that was not possible. "How can we not feel anger, Rabbi Weiss?" asked one woman.

And it does seem that anger is fueling much of the energy behind this movement. Batsheva Marcus, chairwoman of the International Women's Tefillah Network and executive director of The Union for Traditional Judaism, an international organization that aims to bring Jewish tradition into

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important thing is that women have to be knowledgeable. That way we are giving people a chance to grow and lead and make choices. Right now there is no track for women who learn [Torah]. We have to give them an opportunity."

Rabbi Saul Berman, chairman of the Department of Judaic Studies at Stern College for Women, echoed those sentiments in his speech at the conference. "We all have to be educated," he said, "to make a decision based on what is correct."

It was unclear whether the emphasis by many of the participating rabbis on women's Judaic education was a step towards actually ordaining women as Orthodox rabbis or not. There is no clear dictum in *halacha* that states that

"I have a problem with rabbis in general," said Silber in response to a question on whether he could see the Orthodox movement ordaining female rabbis. But, he added, "I think we should change the rabbis' role within the synagogue to give women more of a role as scholars and as educators."

Rabbi Avi Weiss, whose synagogue, Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, was the first to host a women's prayer group, seemed to be taking a tentative move in the same direction. "There is no ordination today really," he said. "We should assess each of the roles played by rabbis and give some of them [to women]." In his speech, he announced that he and Rabbi Berman have developed a program, Meorot (enlightened women), that is to begin next year.

the lives and homes of Jews, called for women to take more of an active role in education, their synagogues and their communities. Marcus would like to see the women's sections in synagogues be less isolated from the center of the synagogue, and women serving on synagogue administrations and ritual committees, and giving sermons in synagogue. "You have to learn to become activists," she said. "It's in our power to create the change, in our homes, in our synagogues, and in our communities. Judaism is not a spectator sport."

Yet the paradox of being spectators in their religious lives while being full participants in their secular lives is one that many of the participants at the conference are living. Many of these women are doctors, lawyers and businesswomen. Current economic realities dictate the need for two-income families, and the Orthodox community is not immune to those pressures. These women are expected to assume power and control in their positions in the workplace and yet return to their communities and sit quietly in the synagogue. Moreover, as a woman in the audience at a workshop entitled "The

Orthodox Superwoman" pointed out, "We are also expected to make Donna Reed-type meals every shabbat."

"I am a health-care consultant," said another young woman attending the workshop. "At work I have to be aggressive and tell people what to do. But then I come back to my community and I have to take a backseat."

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There were indications that this struggle for Orthodox women to find a voice in their community was being addressed. In another workshop, "Lifecycle Ceremonies," different options were presented through which Orthodox women can be more active participants in traditional Jewish ceremonies and still remain within the realm of Orthodox Jewish law.

"The woman's role is traditionally

private in Judaism," said Naomi Mark, a social worker and one of the workshop's presenters. "But in the modern world, women's roles are more public." Mark discussed how an Orthodox woman can overcome her silent role at her wedding by writing a vow that she can read under the chuppah or by breaking the glass with her husband.

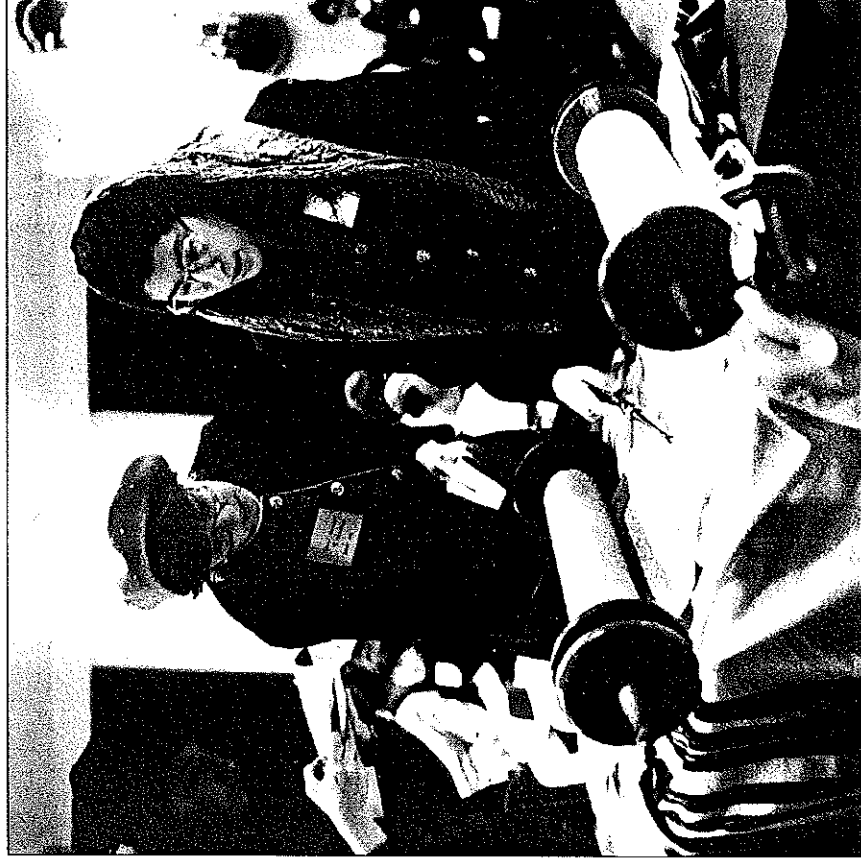
Another presenter at the workshop, Rebecca Hirshfeld, discussed the baby-naming ceremony she held for her newborn daughter at a women's prayer group in which the men stood on the other side of the partition. She was called up for an *aliyah* to the Torah, and her mother held the baby while she announced the baby's name. Ideas were also presented for a girl's bat mitzvah that could be held in a women's prayer group, in which the girl could read her portion of the Torah just like a boy does at his bar mitzvah.

But, of course, beyond its permissibility within *halacha* is perhaps the larger issue of whether the community will allow a woman to celebrate her rituals in this manner. "We will never deter the detractors," admitted Miriam Schachter, who ran a workshop on "Women's Prayer Groups." "There are rabbis who oppose women's prayer groups. But there are enough examples out there of rabbis who give permission [for the women's prayer groups]. Trust me, if you have a *simcha*, they will come!"

Such confidence seems appropriate for Schachter, a founder of the Women's Tefillah of Riverdale, which is part of the Women's Tefillah Network. The Network, an affiliation of women's prayer groups here and abroad, estimates that there are now approximately 40,000 Jewish women that pray in women's prayer groups, with much of that attendance increasing in the past few years.

Still, as Schachter pointed out, every community has its sensitivities. One woman whispered that in her synagogue

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in the New York area she had wanted to make a kiddush for her daughter at her bat mitzvah. "There wasn't any Torah reading but the rabbi of the synagogue said that we couldn't make the kiddush unless we called it her birthday, not bat mitzvah," she said.

In Israel, according to Alice Shalvi, director of the Israel Women's Network, the feminist agenda is not making much headway. While she did say that places of higher learning for Orthodox women are increasing in Israel and that Orthodox women have begun to attend the annual feminist conference in Israel, she feels that the stronger political power of the ultra-Orthodox has resulted in less progress for [women's rights]. Laws of divorce, she pointed out, are still the exclusive jurisdiction of the rabbinical courts. Four years ago, the International Coalition of Agunot Rights (ICAR) developed *halachically*-based solutions to the problems of *agunot* but, according to Shalvi, the rabbinical courts in Israel have not acted upon them. Shalvi also noted that there has been an increasing wave of domestic violence in Israel, but women still are encouraged to return to their abusive husbands by the rabbinical courts on the grounds of "keeping the peace in the house."

"We feel intense anger," she said at the conference. "How patient do we have to be? How long do we have to wait? I want to see Miriam reinstated alongside Moses and Aaron and acknowledged as a prophet and a leader."

Shalvi's call for a dialogue between men and women and especially between the ultra-Orthodox and more modern Orthodox factions of Judaism was echoed by many of many speakers at the conference. "We are not fighting about fundamentals," said Rabbi Adam Minsk, rabbi of the Lincoln Square Synagogue on the Upper West Side in Manhattan, referring to the growing chasm between the two factions. "We are fighting about interpretation."

But for some women in the audience the battle was proving to be disheartening. "Is there nothing positive about being a woman in Judaism?" asked a middle-aged woman from the audience, her voice cracking, after Rabbi Minsk

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was finished. "Why am I not hearing about the spiritually satisfying parts? I am a newly-Orthodox Jew and I am beginning to wonder if I made a big mistake."

For some of the newly Orthodox as well as for those that were raised as Orthodox Jews, giving up the fight does seem tempting. Why bother with figuring out what would be permissible according to the Torah? Who cares what a woman can or can't do according to *halacha*? Why not find spiritual satisfaction elsewhere?

But most of these women continue and will continue to struggle to figure out how to make this religion theirs. While they believe in feminism and expect their religion to regard them as equals, they also have a deep commitment to their religious convictions. They know that as Orthodox Jews they will not allow anything to compromise their beliefs. And yet, they know that as women and as feminists they cannot let anyone tell them that they are any less of a Jew or a person than anyone else. Making these two sometimes compet-

ing ideologies work together is their greatest challenge and they know it.

So, beyond the realization that a conference such as this was long overdue and needs to continue on an annual basis, for many women the most important part of the meeting was that the questions they had been whispering about and the ideas they had been grappling with were finally being asked and aired in a serious forum. And while no sweeping resolutions emerged, the personal resolutions of each woman, who as a result of the conference decided to learn more Torah or Talmud or attend her local women's prayer group or get more involved in her daughter's Jewish education, were equally as important.

"My daughter couldn't understand why she wasn't getting *tzitzit* for her third birthday like her brother did," said Shani Berrin. "Before I came to the conference I wasn't sure what I should do for her. But," she added with a smile, "now I am."

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