

Phillips, David

Orthodox Feminism Arrives

Orthodox women are agitating for a more meaningful role in their community's religious life.

By Miriam Rinn



Members of an Orthodox women's prayer group.

R. BANAI

SOMETHING NEW IS AFOOT among the women of the Orthodox community. These days, those shy young women with their long-sleeved blouses, long skirts and perky berets are lifting their eyes and thinking about something more than children and the holidays. Many young Orthodox women are demanding, and pursuing, advanced education and careers. But even more shocking to the Orthodox establishment, some are agitating for a more meaningful role in the religious life of their community. Can they get what they want? Some people believe it's inevitable.

"It's scary, but exciting," says Marian Krug, an Orthodox feminist, about the change in her community. "Orthodox women are moving slowly and carefully toward their goal. There are things that cannot be changed because Torah law is Torah law, but

beyond that there are many things women don't do because they haven't been done [before]. I think it's time to peel away what is social prejudice, what is custom, and what is habit."

It is just this kind of questioning that is causing many Orthodox families to start doing what was previously unthinkable: many are celebrating bat mitzvahs, having "Shalom Bat" welcoming parties for newborn girls, and even allowing the bride to have a speaking part at weddings.

Orthodox feminists' demands, although relatively few, cut deep. Not only do they want more participation and representation in synagogue ritual and leadership, they also want access to the Torah, something culturally forbidden since the Middle Ages. Women want attention paid to their particular needs as well: child-

care, so a woman can pray without disruption; a more equitable interpretation of divorce regulations; and serious attention to religious education for girls.

According to Krug, the Orthodox community will eventually reconcile itself to these and other feminist demands since it can't afford to alienate its most talented women. "In open societies," she points out, "women must be anchored in the communities or they will leave." Many Orthodox leaders worry about a "brain drain," since as the community becomes more acculturated its brightest and most talented young adults, like their Conservative and Reform compatriots, go into commerce and the professions rather than the less well remunerated fields of Jewish education and communal work. These same leaders are asking whether their community can afford

to ignore 50 percent of its potential leaders. Still, attitudes change slowly, and the feminists have a long way to go, as Krug's own experience illustrates.

Krug's "radicalization" dates from events that occurred 15 years ago in Baltimore, MD. There, she once brought a *ba'alot t'shuvah* (a Jewish woman who has embraced Orthodoxy) to pray with her at her synagogue, where she was very active. The young woman was so impressed by Krug's shul that she wanted to become a member. It was then that Krug learned that, although her own name appeared on a membership list, she herself was not a member. Women weren't allowed to be members of the synagogue. When Krug complained about this unequal treatment to the shul's board of directors, the board members were incredulous. "Why would you want to be a member," they asked her. "After all, you can come and pray whenever you like."

Although the ensuing controversy split the synagogue in two, with half supporting Krug's position, she felt she could no longer pray there. She joined a women's prayer group which in Orthodox terms was a hotbed of radical religious practice. "The first time I went to read from the Torah, I was shaking," Krug says of this traditionally forbidden practice that nonetheless is not prohibited by Halacha (Jewish law). "I still shake when I go up."

For now, Orthodox feminists like those of Krug's prayer group are trying to achieve "separate but equal" status in the religion — davening and reading Torah on their own — since they honor the restrictions of religious law governing women, like those forbidding women to chant in the presence of men, that Orthodoxy considers sacred and immutable. Still, however, they are mindful that others have tried a "separate but equal" approach and found it want-



Marian Krug

R. BANAI

"The first time I went to read from the Torah, I was shaking."

ing. Fern Amper, a Jewish educator in New Jersey who, like Krug, belongs to an Orthodox women's prayer group, believes that only this first generation of Orthodox feminists will be content with such an arrangement. Their daughters, argues this daughter of a very Orthodox Brooklyn household, will be used to greater freedoms and demand even more participation in the life of the synagogue. This movement may come sooner than many think.

Young Orthodox women are not immune to the influence of the women's movement, which has won substantial equality for women in the other streams of Judaism, and to other "outside" influences. Amper credits the growing numbers of *ba'alot t'shuvah* for an unexpected effect on the community that welcomed them so

enthusiastically. Accustomed to greater freedom and respect, and with the zeal of converts, *ba'al t'shuvah* women are asking many incendiary questions about women's role in the synagogue and in Judaism. Orthodox rabbis often dismiss these questions as the legacy of these women's pernicious secular backgrounds. But they are finding that the same questions are being taken up by daughters of long-standing Orthodox families, who cannot be so easily ignored.

This sea-change in the attitudes of young Orthodox women, all agree, comes from their greater access to the opportunity that has changed the lives of almost all American Jewish women under age 50: higher education. More and more bright Orthodox girls are not only attending college, but going on to become doctors, lawyers, social workers and other kinds of professionals. The ultra-Orthodox, Hasidic sects still discourage such liberalism, but "modern" Orthodox parents by and large are proud to see their girls succeed, even if the price is increased questioning of tradition.

Parallel to the expansion in secular higher education has been some expansion in the breadth and depth of Orthodox women's Jewish educations. While Orthodox women are taught to sanctify G-d in all of their daily activities, through the laws of kashrut, preparing for holidays and the Sabbath, and performing the rituals of menstrual purity, their opportunities for study of Judaism's classical texts have traditionally been quite limited. And, many argue, only mastery of the sources will convince certain Orthodox authorities that women deserve leadership positions.

Rabbi David Silber founded the Drisha Institute in Manhattan in 1979 to provide Orthodox women with intensive training in the study and analysis of traditional Jewish texts. A co-educational faculty teaches classes in Bible, Talmud, and rabbinics. "People respect quality," Silber notes. "If women are as knowledgeable as men, their opinions will be listened to." Silber describes most Orthodox day schools as places where girls are discouraged from thinking or questioning. "It's a double standard and it's very pernicious," he says. At Drisha, he tries to change that. Although most of the institute's 250 students are part-time, a summer high school program brings young girls together to study intensively for five weeks. These high school girls, Silber believes, will become catalysts of further change.

Marian Krug describes the process she has seen so many times: "The more you learn [about Jewish texts], the more you realize how little you know. That's what's happening with these young women. They go to Jewish day schools, then they go to Israel [to study for a year at the end of high school or as part of college. They have a dual college education--secular and Jewish studies. After they get married, they just can't put their brains on hold."

Of course, there is pronounced opposition to these changes from many in the Orthodox hierarchy and from ordinary Orthodox men. Some simply fear the new, arguing that the status quo should continue because

things have always been done that way. Others genuinely resent the dislocations they imagine women's increased participation in the life of the synagogue will entail.

Krug recounts that at one lecture she attended on why women should have more responsibilities in the synagogue, an older man stood up and asked in great distress who would prepare his lunch if his wife spent Sabbath morning davening in the shul. Sometimes the opposition is more pointed. When Krug's prayer group held its first bat mitzvah, an Orthodox rabbi in town announced from his pulpit that such untoward



R. BANN

happenings had to be stopped and urged the women in his congregation to protest against the event. There has also been a swirling controversy surrounding the Israeli women's prayer group called

"Women at the Wall," which meets at the Western Wall for a women-only Torah service. The group has come under repeated physical attack by ultra-Orthodox Jews and is now petitioning for its right of assembly in the Israeli High Court of Justice (see Shulamit S. Magnus, *Speaking for Women at the Wall*, Winter 1990 Reporter-ed.).

Even Orthodox authorities who generally view the improvement of Orthodox women's educations in a positive light feel, however, that limits still exist on the extent that women may participate in shul. Says

Rabbi Benjamin Yagur of Congregation Beth Tefillah, an Orthodox synagogue in Paramus, New Jersey, echoing an oft-repeated argument, "the focal point of Jewish life is not the synagogue. There are a host of mitzvot that both men and women can occupy themselves with." Yagur says he understands and sympathizes with the frustrations of women who want greater participation and opportunities to enhance their spiritual growth. But he also points out that not every frustration can be ameliorated in accordance with Jewish law. The answers Orthodox feminists seek may lie beyond Halacha, according to the rabbi.

At one time, Yagur considered encouraging the formation of a women's prayer group in his own synagogue, but was dissuaded from doing so by his own rabbi, the famous rabbinic authority Joseph Soloveitchik. While Yagur can envision women serving as Torah educators, even imparting halachic insights, he wonders whether this relatively limited role will satisfy the feminists.

In general, Orthodox rabbis mistrust feminists, who they see as radicals agitating for halachically unacceptable equal and identical roles. They are also rather suspicious of the intentions of non-Orthodox Jewish feminists, such as Phyllis Chesler, who have rallied to the side of Orthodox women seeking change (see Alan J. Yuter, *Jewry Up Against the Wall*, Winter 1990 Reporter-ed.). But Orthodox feminists affirm, along with Women at the Wall member Rivka Haut, that "Torah feminism is not turning away from Judaism; it is turning toward Judaism." Orthodox women wish to become an even more integral part of their community, and to give it all they have to offer.

Miriam Finn wrote about the National Yiddish Book Center in our Spring Issue.