

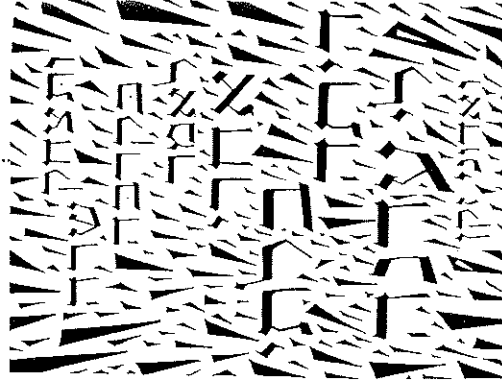
AN ISRAELI WOMAN WILL NOT SHUT UP

IsraelNationalNews.com. reported that when a Montreal synagogue received a letter from an Islamic organization that stated "Death to the Jews, this letter contains anthrax. Death to Israel. Islam marches forward," the Jewish community tried to keep it quiet. But **Esti Mayer**, an Israeli living in Montreal, informed Israel Radio. Israelis, she said, do not keep threats quiet.

OLD GIRLS' NETWORK

Last January, Israeli women who work in high-tech set up their own branch of the women's international networking organization "DigitalEve," which has more than 20 branches worldwide. The Jerusalem Post reported in October. So far "DigitalEve" in Israel has about 160 members. The Post noted that women in Israel especially need to form their own networks, because most of the power players in high-tech originated from army intelligence units, the old-boys' network par excellence, a fact that effectively shuts women out of the loop.

This passage is read during Rosh HaShanah: "And Sarah said, 'After I am spent, will there still be pleasure for me? And my man is old.'" One of a series of posters interpreting Biblical quotes by or about women, by **Harriet Finck**. harfin50@aol.com



Orthodoxy and Women: Not Egalitarian But A Step In The Right Direction...

Feminists from every segment of the Jewish community are continuing to fight the good fight for women's fuller participation. But Orthodox interpretations of *halakha*—Jewish law—can make the struggle particularly difficult for Orthodox women. Still, Orthodox feminists are coming up with new halakhic paradigms for women's participation in Orthodox Judaism.

Increased opportunities for Orthodox women's religious participation have come unexpectedly from the World Trade Center disaster. The New York Times reported that nine young women from Stern College of Yeshiva University have joined other volunteers in sitting *shmira*—the ritual of keeping watch over the dead until they are buried—at the New York City Medical Examiner's office, where the remains of victims have been transported. The women have the blessings of Yeshiva president **Dr. Norman Lamm**, who, according to The Times, "agreed without hesitation that the normal gender rules—women can sit *shmira* only for other women, while men can sit for any deceased person—could be waived under the circumstances."

In addition, The Drisha Institute, a non-denominational, "culturally Orthodox" New York institution that provides women with the opportunity to study Jewish texts on an advanced level, held an innovative service this past High Holiday season. Along with the traditional service led by men, Drisha sponsored another service, for women and men, in which women led the *P'sukei D'Zimra* prayers and participated fully in the Torah reading. According to some Orthodox interpretations—such as one published in the on-line Edah journal—women's participation in these sections of the service does not go against Jewish law.

The Drisha service was "not egalitarian, but it's an important move in the right direction," said **Rabbi David Silber**, dean of Drisha, adding that increased women's participation benefits everyone. "If more people feel that they have a stake in it [prayer], they participate more. It raises the level of prayer for everyone."

Rabbi Silber has not received any direct negative responses to the inclusive prayer services, although he has heard that there has been "some controversy"—presumably from people who oppose these changes on halakhic grounds, or simply because they alter the customs of the Orthodox prayer service. But mostly, said Rabbi Silber, the response has been to say "Thank you."

In another development, the Orthodox Caucus—an organization dedicated to finding "new strategies for dealing with issues confronting halakhic Judaism in contemporary society"—is sponsoring a scholarship to support the education of *Yoatza! Halakha*, female experts in the laws of sexuality and fertility. Recipients of this scholarship will go to Israel for an intense course of study that includes an examination of the relevant laws, as well as supplementary studies in gynecology, fertility, and sexuality. Afterwards, they will return to the US to work as advisors to women about the laws of married sex, and to promote the idea that women can give Jewish legal advice in this capacity. **Laurie Novick**, the first recipient of this funding, is currently training in Israel.

In Israel, a "Halakhic Advisory Hotline," where women ask female advisors about menstruation, sex and fertility, has already been functioning for a year.

"Orthodox women will, we feel, benefit tremendously from the opportunity to turn to a woman with questions of a sensitive nature," says **Dr. Giti Bendheim**, co-chair of the Orthodox Caucus' Task Force on Women and Orthodoxy. She says female advisors will "ease the way" for many observant women, who may be reluctant to discuss matters of sexuality with male rabbis.

The Rabbi Defends the Pediatrician

He was perfect: self-assured, with sterling credentials, and generations of adoring mothers entrusted their children to him. He was active in his community, and in his Reform synagogue. So when the New York State Health Department last December revoked the license of **Dr. Stuart Copperman, 66**, after an investigation revealed that he had sexually molested six female patients, the affluent Long Island community where he had practiced pediatrics for 35 years went into convulsions, followed by denial.

Over and over again, people in Merrick, New York, where Dr. Copperman had his in-house office, said that they couldn't believe that the good doctor, whom many described as "like a god," had committed the hideous acts of which he was accused. One woman, who said she had known the doctor and his family for years, speculated that the young women who testified were all pathological liars. Six former patients, now adults, had testified to a state panel in the summer of 2000 that Dr. Copperman had molested them when they were teenagers. Their allegations of the abuse were strikingly similar, and graphic: the doctor, after telling their mothers that he wanted to talk to their daughters in private, would then perform a "vaginal cleaning" with his bare fingers. Moreover, after the story hit the media, dozens of additional women came forward with testimony, both to the media and to the State Health Department. **Debra Geller Lieberman, 39**, said that the doctor had molested her three times, when she was 8, 9, and 10. Lieberman's father, also a doctor, was a colleague of Dr. Copperman. But, said Lieberman, when she later complained to her mother, the response she got was "a nice Jewish doctor from Long Island just doesn't do things like that."

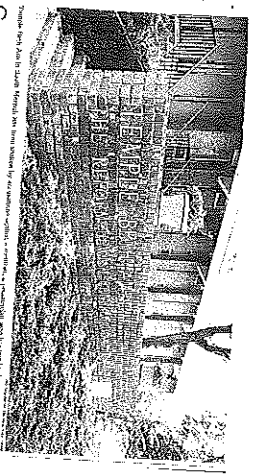
Dr. Copperman has not to date been accused of a crime, although the Nassau County District Attorney continues to investigate the case. Revocation of his medical license was done under the state's administrative law, which states that he can seek to reclaim it after three years.

Shortly after the story broke in Long Island *Newsday* last December, **Rabbi Ronald Brown**, rabbi of Dr. Copperman's synagogue, Temple Beth Am of Merrick, where the doctor was a generous donor, wrote a letter to the local paper stating that the pediatrician "was a caring person and a dedicated physician," that he had known the doctor for years, that the doctor had taken care of the rabbi's own children, and that Dr. Copperman was "a person to whom I can entrust the care of those I love."

And while this public support of Dr. Copperman made many congregants angry, the rabbi did not retract his letter. One woman, who did not want to be identified, said that "the rabbi is still the rabbi, and you have to forgive him. Rabbi Brown didn't know all the facts."

Reporting this story for The New York Times this past September reminded me how risky it is for a woman to tell the truth, especially when she is going up against powerful men like the rabbi and the pediatrician. Nearly everybody I interviewed for the story later expressed regret for having commented on the case. A woman from the congregation who had agreed to be quoted called a few days later, her voice shaking with anger, as she accused me of "trying to embarrass our temple." Then another woman whom I had interviewed, whose daughter had been the first victim to come forward, screamed at me over the telephone after the Times article ran for supposedly "whitewashing" the doctor. Never again, she told me, would she speak to a reporter. I told her that however much she hated the way I had told the story, she had done the world a service by talking to me. How else would the victims' voices have been heard?

ALICE SPARBERG ALEXIOU



Congregant in Scandal Shakes Up Temple

For many years, the Temple Beth Am Congregation in Merrick, Long Island, was known for its high standards of ethical conduct. The temple's rabbi, Ronald Brown, was a respected figure in the community. But last December, the temple's reputation was shaken when it was revealed that its pediatrician, Dr. Stuart Copperman, had been accused of sexually molesting six female patients. The temple's response was swift and decisive. Rabbi Brown, who had known Dr. Copperman for years, issued a public statement defending the doctor. He stated that Dr. Copperman was a caring person and a dedicated physician. The temple's response was widely criticized, and the temple's reputation was severely damaged. The temple's board of trustees is currently investigating the matter. The temple's future is uncertain.

Women and Jewish Meditation

"Coming to New York is a little like making a shiva call." These are the words of **Sheila Peltz Weinberg**, rabbi of the Jewish Community of Amherst (Massachusetts), speaking on November 11 at a Jewish meditation conference in New York City. She explained, "When we practice mindfulness, the quality of attending moment to moment, we are getting ready to be in the house of sorrow . . . The trick in paying a shiva call or in meditation—perhaps the trick in life—is to be calm and alert." She also pointed out that September 11, like other days of calamity, can be identified just by its date, like Tisha B'Av.

Women played major roles throughout the four-day conference on "Jewish Meditation: The Next Steps," sponsored by Eliat Chayim, the Jewish spiritual retreat center in Accord, N.Y. As a relatively new aspect of mainstream Judaism, Jewish meditation has no entrenched male establishment, and women, many but not all of them rabbis, are clearly active as movement leaders.

Despite the fact that the *Yonetet Halacha* position falls safely within the boundaries of Jewish law, not everyone is applauding the change.

"I have heard that, for some people, this [having female advisors] infringes on the relationship between a Rav and those who should be turning to him for religious advice and questions," says Bendheim. "There are others who feel that rabbis' wives have been answering these questions from time immemorial, and that this unofficial channel worked perfectly well." She adds, however, that *Yozivot Halakha* are exhaustively educated in these subjects in a way that rabbis' wives have not necessarily been, and that this expertise derives from their own, and not their husband's thorough knowledge.

RACHEL KRANSON

TO SPEAK DIRECTLY TO a *Yonetet Halakha*, call the "International Halakhic Advisory Hotline." In Israel: (02) 642-0102 Outside of Israel: 972-2-642-0102

Debby Hirschman: The Woman Behind America's Biggest JCC



The striking new glass, steel and Jerusalem-stone building at 76th Street and Amsterdam Avenue on Manhattan's Upper West Side houses state-of-the-art sports facilities as well as a *beit midrash* (traditional house of study). Also a kosher dairy café, computerized listings of Jewish resources throughout the city, and a Judaica shop run in cooperation with the Jewish Museum. And for those who incorporate Zen into their Judaism, there is a meditation area.

This remarkable new Jewish Community Center in Manhattan—"Doors Wide Open in January 2002" as its big outdoor sign reads—has come to life under the direction of **Debby Hirschman**, 48, with a \$70-million capital campaign that makes it the most expensive JCC ever built. Hired as executive director of the then-nascent JCC of the Upper West Side in 1990, which deliberately operated without a building, using borrowed facilities, Hirschman has shaped this JCC, now the biggest in America, with the determination she showed back in her student days at Barnard College as captain of the basketball team.

Hirschman grew up playing football with the boys, but when her mother died when Hirschman was 10, she also took on traditional female responsibilities, calling the butcher before going to school in the morning, and then waiting up at night for her older brothers to come home.

At the JCC, Hirschman early on accomplished the seemingly impossible feat of involving all 17 Upper West Side synagogues, ranging from Orthodox to Reform, in her plans. She has brought in more than 80 members to the board, which includes people of all ages, income levels, religious involvement and non-involvement, gay and straight, with a near-even division of men and women. Together, Hirschman and the board hammered out compromises on difficult issues, like offering gay and lesbian programming, and opening the JCC for some programs on Saturday afternoons.

There have, however, been rough spots. When the board changed the name "JCC on the Upper West Side" to the "JCC in Manhattan," last spring, all hell broke loose.

TO SERVE OR NOT TO SERVE

A listserve hosted by Bridges, a journal for "Jewish feminists and their friends" that has about 400 subscribers, is a forum for, among other topics, promoting peace activism in Israel, which many find controversial. This past summer, when the discussion turned contentious, moderator **Clare Kinberg** suspended the list for a month and a half.

It all started with a posting about a *yizkor* [memorial] book that a list member was compiling containing the names of the Israeli Jews who had died in the past year as a result of the violence. When another participant responded that it was only fair for the names of Palestinians who have been killed to also be included, tempers began to flare. "Do you think I'm breaking some sportsman's rule by crying for Jews who have been killed?" one woman demanded. Another writer said that she was "appalled by the Jewish denial of Israel's rights." And another called members of the list "self-hating Jews who are quick to rush to yell about 'Israeli atrocities' but who conveniently forget about the Jews who were brutally murdered."

When Kinberg reopened the list in September, she said that for those whose main reason for participating was to argue against information about the Israeli peace movement, "I hope you will unsub yourself."

AND SPEAKING OF LISTS—IS THREE A TREND?

In this communications revolution, some Jewish women are using e-mail to construct a kind of informal media-cum-public opinion watch. **Talia Carner**, an Israeli-born writer on Long Island, (*Wordfair10@aol.com*) started a list after the most recent Intifada began in September 2000. Carner, who describes her political position as "in the middle," says she spends up to three hours a day, scanning different sites and collecting articles. She sends out between three and five articles a day, to a list that now totals a few hundred people. She does not, she said, distribute any material that advocates "extreme positions." Novelist and commentator **Naomi Ragen**, who lives in Israel, also maintains a list as well as a web site (*www.naomiragen.com; Naomi@Naomiragen.com*). She sends recipients her own columns, some of which appear in the Jerusalem Post and other newspapers. **Maxine Elkins**, of Princeton, N.J., also maintains a list, which she, like Carner, started a year ago, in her words, "after the Palestinian terrorism war."

"As a Jewish woman committed to Israel, I could not just sit on all these e-mails I was getting," Elkins said. "I had to forward them." Her list at present contains about 200 names. Elkins, however, prefers not to publish her e-mail address. The reason? "Some of her messages," she said, "are activist." For example, she circulated a petition to the Nobel committee, to take away Arafat's peace prize. "My list," she said, "is private among people of my own choosing."

Dr. Ruth Westheimer, the no-nonsense sex therapist who is president of the YM & YWHA of Washington Heights & Inwood on New York's uppermost Upper West Side, along with **Martin Englisher**, executive vice president of the Y, asked the JCC to cease and desist immediately from using the name "JCC in Manhattan." Hirshman's reaction: "We mishandled it in not communicating in advance." She also makes the point: "Our competition is not each other. Our competition comes from all the secular institutions competing for the time, the philanthropic resources of our Jewish community."

But for all Hirshman's fierce commitment to her job, she makes it clear that her daughter **Elishava**, now a college student, whom she's raised on her own since she was 18 months old, comes first. Hirshman once interrupted a fundraising meeting to speak to her daughter on the phone. And, yes, she raised the million dollars that she was seeking.

A.S.

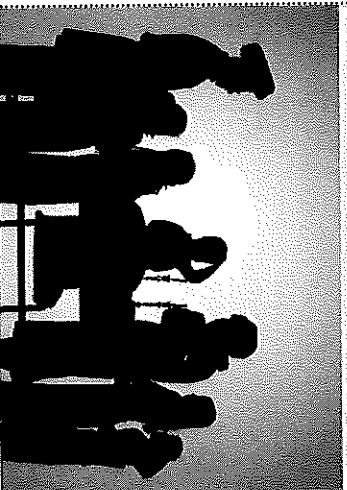
"Trembling Before G-d"

Trembling Before G-d? the groundbreaking film by **Sandi Simcha Dubowski** documents the lives of Orthodox and Hasidic gay and lesbian Jews, who both struggle against and give in to the fierce pull of their religious world.

In one of the most poignant segments of the film, "**Malka**" and "**Leah**," a couple who met at their ultra-orthodox Bais Yaakov high school, carve out a place for their sexual and emotional commitments within Orthodoxy: "I'm trying to do as many mitzvos as I can so there can be a place for us in Olam Habbah [the next world] together," says

"Malka." Their lives are structured not only by the obligation and desire to perform mitzvot but by a profound belief in a God who hears and answers them.

Also featured in the film is **Big Knish**, Tours leader Israel, from Brooklyn. Israel rejects his former Orthodox life



entirely; instead, he finds community and family ties within the secular gay world. But he is still in pain and in dialogue with the world that rejected him.

The most painful scenes are those shot in silhouette, to disguise identities, of homosexual Hasidic men and women trapped in heterosexual marriages, yearning for an intimacy and love they cannot have.

Understandably, "**Trembling Before G-d**" has won awards at Sundance and at other film festivals in Berlin, Jerusalem and Los Angeles. This fall, it played to sell-out crowds in New York, breaking box office records at the Film Forum for opening day ticket sales.

"**Trembling**" challenges the Orthodox world to a communal *heshbon nefesh*, a spiritual accounting, to reevaluate whether halakic norms have become an excuse for social prejudice. The film asks liberal Jews, gay and lesbian audiences, and others to wrestle with a different question: what makes these brave and often lonely souls want to remain within this uncompromising community? Why speak to a rabbi who will at best advise celibacy, when one could seek out from a liberal or even a gay rabbi—or no rabbi at all—and find acceptance?

If "**Trembling**" had done only the important work of exposing the heretofore unrecorded lives of gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews, *doyerna*. But "**Trembling**" goes far beyond that, giving non-Orthodox viewers a sense of the force and embrace of that community, the loss of which offers liberation to some but an empty void to others.