

# Staking A Claim To Tradition

*Orthodox women at their first conference on feminism seek greater religious involvement, despite new rabbinic sanctions.*

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STAFF WRITER

It was standing-room-only at morning services Sunday at the Grand Hyatt Hotel. Inside Ballroom B, some 200 observant Jews with prayerbooks chanted together facing a makeshift bima. Some wore prayer shawls; a rare few wore tallitot.

The worshippers all were women, attendees at the first-ever International Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy.

Just outside the ballroom a young man davened alone, face into a corner, in keeping with the traditional separation of the sexes during prayer.

Framed by a decorative mirror in the crowded hotel hallway, the moment reflected a turning of the tables, a world dominated, briefly, by women seeking greater participation in Jewish ritual within the bounds of halacha, traditional Jewish law.

The two-day conference, punctuated throughout by prayer, drew up to 1,000 participants — almost all women — each day for intense discussion on issues ranging from wom-



**Making history: Zella Goldfinger was one of 1,000 participants at the two-day conference at the Grand Hyatt in Midtown.** *Michael Dankashi*

en's prayer groups to halachic innovations to the plight of *agunot*, women whose estranged husbands refuse to grant them a religious divorce.

The conference took place only a few weeks after a controversial ban on women's prayer groups by a Queens rabbinical group — a move that energized many women and surely increased attendance.

Opened by conference chair Blu Greenberg, the event included talks

by Talmudic scholars Tamar Ross and Rabbis Saul Berman, David Silber and Avi Weiss; and updates from Orthodox feminists in England, South Africa, Australia and Israel.

In workshops given by rabbis and female scholars, conference-goers — mothers and daughters, career women and homemakers — studied ancient Talmudic sources that may support some of today's most radical ideas.

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that observant women may wear tzitzit, the fringed garment usually worn only by men; that women may chant certain blessings apparently reserved for men; and that women may climb the Judaic learning ladder with hopes of one day earning equal status, if not equal title, with male rabbis.

Among the calls:

■ "Get rid of the [women's] balconies" in synagogues, said Bat Sheva Marcus, chair of the Women's Tefila Network and a member of the conference steering committee. "Judaism was not meant to be a spectator sport."

■ "We have to have equal sightlines in shul" so the traditional barrier between the sexes does not cut women out, said Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg, founder of CLAL-The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, Rabbi Greenberg, Bit's husband, cited the writings of the late Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the dean of Modern Orthodoxy, to show that increased women's participation is consistent with Jewish law.

■ Feminism and female spirituality should be seen not as a forbidden secular invasion but as "part of a new revelation—even if it stems from forces outside Judaism—as a gift from God," said Ross, of Bar-Ilan University and Midreshet Lindenbaum, a women's yeshiva in Israel.

■ "Boys and girls should get exactly the same education," said Rabbi Silber, noting that Orthodox schools often limit Talmudic study for girls.

It's not that the tracks boys learn are any more important in the long run, said the rabbi, founder of Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, a Manhattan school of advanced learning for women. Rather, he said, "It's the message you send to the girls that there's something they can't study. That's the damaging thing."

That message, by and large, already had been rejected by the majority of women at the conference, who displayed undampened enthusiasm for learning and prayer.

The scene vibrated with colorful contrast. "There were women who wear pants, women who cover their hair, and women who wear pants *and* cover their hair," laughed conference committee member Ronnie Becher, who concluded the conference by summing up the



**Dot P'lor: Women from all generations participated in workshops on topics such as Jewish divorce and domestic violence.** Michael Danikash

And while cutting-edge topics were debated and discussed, several participants quietly pursued a traditional female task: crocheting yarmulkes, stitching Hebrew names into pillowcases or putting the final touches into a talit bag.

"It helps me listen," said attorney Laura Shaw-Frank, 28, finishing a needlepoint talit bag for her husband, Rabbi Aaron Frank, education director at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

"I can't be with my husband all the time, so it is my way of sharing my life with him," said Shaw-Frank, adding that "some of the spirit of this convention will be wrapped around his talit, near his heart."

Discussion at the event echoed decades of debate about women's roles in Judaism, particularly in a secular society that upholds equal opportunity in education and the workplace. In the last several years, voices have grown louder, with observant women's prayer groups forming worldwide, rabbis joining in advocacy for agunot and distant rumblings about eventual ordination of Orthodox women.

## A Turning Point

In keeping with the Judaic norm, there were far more questions than answers here. But it still broke new ground by gathering so many inquirers under one roof with rabbis who have promised to seek halachic solutions.

showed their public support for us," said Esther Farber, the conference coordinator and a longtime Orthodox feminist activist. She called the event "a turning point in the history of Orthodox Jewish women."

In a veiled reference to the recent decision by a group of Queens rabbis forbidding women's prayer groups on the grounds that they flout tradition, Farber decried those who "jump to conclusions about women's motivation... without ever really asking the women how they felt or why they were pushing for these changes."

Most of the women at the conference, said Farber, "are very serious about expressing themselves spiritually and directly, and being participants rather than observers, to enhance their Judaism."

While the program was studded with names of well-known Orthodox activists and scholars, the hotel's hallways, ballrooms and meeting spaces were crowded with the rank and file, each hoping to fulfill a dream.

"I came to find a medium that includes me," said Judy Schanzer of New Jersey, who had "felt like chopped liver" in the synagogue balcony during the bar mitzvah of her son, whom she raised for 10 years alone after her first husband died.

"Modern Orthodox men and women have to start being more active in the community," said Bertha Kressel of Elizabeth, N.J. "This is a good start."

erations," said Ellen Levitt, 32, of Brooklyn, "especially young women who will not take for granted that not everything has been achieved for them already."

"In academic life, I consider myself completely equal," said Tova Mervis, 24, who attended the conference with her husband, Allan Galper, 26. "But I struggle over the roles I play in Jewish communal life."

Conversely, Mervis said she used to consider calculus and English literature the most challenging subjects in school. Now, "I am finding out that Jewish studies could be even more challenging," she said.

One woman, whose husband is a rabbi in a Young Israel congregation, said she did not identify with the feminist theme and was concerned that she would get a negative reception at home if her name were printed.

But she said she would bring home a determination to perform more of the *mitzvot*, or commandments, that are available to women.

Across the spectrum was Rachel Barbanel-Fried, who "thought I would be the only person wearing jeans." Barbanel-Fried, 22, was busy crocheting a yarmulke for a male friend during the opening program. She attended the program with her mother, Laura Barbanel.

Mother-daughter pairs were common. "I have always felt strongly that it wasn't the Torah's intent to disenfranchise women," said Beth Kovelson, 44, who had encouraged her daughter, Danielle Kulak, 21, to come to the conference with her.

Kovelson, who had been an agunah for four years until her first husband granted her a divorce, described the experience as "like a psychological rape. And I knew that is not what God wanted."

What is relevant for Kulak was the conviction that women be "as involved in Jewish life and culture and practice as men are. Because men can't do it alone."

Laura Pilosoph, 11, of Riverdale said she liked coming to the conference with her mother, Mary, "because she usually goes to work every morning." Laura said she planned to talk about the event at her bat mitzvah, which like that of her older sister, Leah, will be held with the women's prayer group at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

Shirley Kaplan said she wanted her 15-year-old daughter, Tamar Kaplan-Marans, to "have things I didn't have as a girl."

"Tamar knows how to *layn* [read] Torah," said Kaplan, who started the Five Towns women's tefillah group on Long Island five years ago. Kaplan was pleased that her daughter considered reading from the Torah normative rather than *avant-garde*.

"We do have our frustrations, though," she said, smiling. "So at a conference like this, where women have dignity and an intellectual bent, it is like oxygen."

## A Makeshift University

The intellectual bent was evident everywhere: As if in a makeshift university, participants constantly took notes, squinted over copies of Talmudic tracts and dutifully handed back the copies to instructors, in accordance with Jewish law prohibiting casual disposal of printed holy words.

Humor was present, as well. "I wasn't aware

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of the Queens opposition to women's tefilla," quipped Rabbi Michael Harris of Hempstead Synagogue in London, who admitted to being confused at first by the news about the Queens Vaad.

Some 300 women broke into laughter, likely imagining the British monarch brandishing her scepter at them.

Overall, though, the mood was overwhelmingly serious at the conference, which announced the existence of a local *bet din*, or religious court, formed three months ago committed to freeing agunot. The court, headed by Rabbi Moshe Morgenstein, includes Rabbis Emanuel Rackman, Irwin Haut and Shalom Klass, and will follow the guidelines of the late Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, a widely revered leader, in seeking to annul problematic marriages. Rabbi Haut said the court already has freed four women.

Marcus, the Women's Tefila Network chair, sought to

change the participants, asserting that women "can push for change without the fear. We can't be thrown out of the RCA [Rabbinical Council of America] because we are not allowed in the RCA," she said. "We can't have our *smicha* [ordination] revoked. Our voices can't be silenced more than they are already."

She encouraged women to increase their participation in home rituals, like making kiddush; in synagogue participation, by joining boards; and in the community, through careers and philanthropy.

At the end of two days of intense study, talk, debate — carried on even in the lines for the restroom — participants were offered the chance to make suggestions for the future.

"Never set up someone on a date who has not given his wife a *get* [Jewish divorce], and never go out with him either," said one woman, standing at an open microphone.

Conference organizers should "create a committee for younger women," said Julie Stern Joseph, 23, who is studying

at Midreshet Lindenbaum in Israel.

"Start a women's tefillah group ... If you do it twice, hey, it's a tradition!"

"Create a new form of minyan with 20 people. Ten men and 10 women, and don't begin davening unless all 20 are there."

"Push for women to become principals of Orthodox day schools," she said.

Rabbi Ilan Adler of Beth Tefillah, a traditional synagogue in Baltimore, said he noticed there was no huge banner with the words "Feminism and Orthodoxy." "Then he realized something: The conference itself was a banner.

Besides, Rabbi Adler said, Hyatt — the name of the hotel — "means tailor in Hebrew.

"It can refer to a man or a woman. It is not gender specific. All of us are weaving an important harmony and community, and the threads bind everyone together," he said.

At her table, Laura Shaw-Frank put the last stitches into the tallit bag for her husband. □