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Jewish week

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'We Are No Longer A Joke'

Twenty-five years after the First National Jewish Women's Conference, the pioneers gather to look back, push ahead.

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In 1973, the Reform movement of Judaism had just begun to ordain women rabbis. Overwhelmingly, men still sat on the boards of national Jewish organizations while women tended to serve as unpaid volunteers. It would be another six years before the Drisha Institute opened its doors and pioneered the movement to make advanced Torah study accessible and acceptable for Orthodox Jewish women.

But at the McAlpin Hotel on 34th Street in Manhattan, 500 women gathered together for the First National Jewish Women's Conference.

The word "feminism," however, remains notably absent from the title of the conference. Back then, "the word had a bad catch to it and would have deterred many people from coming," said Sheryl Nestel, the conference's chief organizer who now lives in Toronto.

Yet, "there was a feeling that change was afloat, that you could challenge various insti-

tutions and thought processes," recalled Aviva Cantor, who helped Nestel organize the '73 conference. "This event wound up sparking a great deal of thought and action."

Lest anyone forget that historic February weekend, Cantor, a prominent Jewish feminist activist and writer, has been hard at work organizing a 25th anniversary celebration of the First National Jewish Women's Conference. While the original conference took place over Presidents Day weekend, the anniversary will be marked by a brunch on Feb. 22 at Congregation Habonim in Manhattan. The event will include reunion-style reminiscences and speeches by Nestel, Judith Hauptmann, Bella Abzug, Blu Greenberg and other women



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who attended the 1973 conference and subsequently made names for themselves. Conference organizers expect that the tone of the day will be divided between celebrating the accomplishments of the past 25 years and discussing the obstacles that Jewish women still face.

Most importantly, the brunch should "remind Jewish women that we have a history that didn't start yesterday," said Doris Gold, the founder and publisher of Biblio Press who is co-organizing the brunch along with Cantor and Shirley Frank. "We seem

to be finding a new development of Jewish women having a kind of purposeful amnesia, of being ignorant about the history of the Jewish women's movement."

The conference occurred at a time of turbulent political and social change — both within and outside the Jewish community. The Women's Liberation movement had taken root in American society while groups like the North American Jewish Students Network sought to radicalize notions of Jewish identity. "A lot of us were trying to make sense of how our new-found feminism could be brought together with our Jewish identities," recalled Nestel. "When we all got together, we discovered a huge range of sensibilities of what it means to create Jewish feminism. But, I think we all felt this commonality of purpose."

While the conference attracted 500 women — which far exceeded the organizers' expectations and resulted in a lack of food — many "in the mainstream Jewish community felt threatened by the gathering," Cantor said. "It was just after the Six-Day War and you had the Black Power movement, hippies and other leftists spouting anti-Zionism. I think people saw us and thought it's like the 10 plagues ... sex, drugs, rock n' roll, the new left, now us. I think we were seen as some strange, horri-

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ble, ironic joke.”

That perception has changed radically. Those who attended the '73 conference point to multiple successes: the ever-increasing number of women rabbis; growth of women's prayer groups and female Torah scholars; egalitarianism in non-Orthodox synagogues and other developments which indicate that the Jewish community takes feminist ideas seriously.

“We are no longer a joke,” Cantor said. “We have achieved a great deal of our agenda, and it's necessary to look back and remember a time when women were invisible in their synagogues and other areas of Jewish life.”

On the other hand, a recent study commissioned by Ma'yan, the Jewish Women's Project of the JCC on the Upper West, concludes that women only make up a quarter of the board members of national Jewish organizations. The study also reports that out of 30 organizations surveyed, only one had a woman in the highest salaried position.

“We're still leaving much of the public Jewish voice to men,” Gold observed. “I think there's still this lack of confidence among Jewish women to speak out and be public.”

And while Orthodox Jewish women will be holding their second feminist conference next week and point to significant gains made in ritual and education, “you can feel so lonely in Orthodox Judaism. It's still tremendously male-oriented,” says Belda Lindenbaum, an Orthodox Jew who attended the '73 conference.

Lindenbaum, who's also the president of the Drisha Institute, recalled “being blown away by so many women who were interested in the same things as me. There was a feeling of commonality and excitement,” she said and added that she wouldn't think of missing the 25th anniversary brunch.

“I've always sought out things like that conference because I need to be with women who really care about their Jewish life,” she said. “It's nourishing and helps me withstand disappointments.”

Cantor sums up the anniversary's significance in academic terms.

“Jewish women have received their master's degrees and we should be proud of that,” she said. “But now we have to move on to our Ph.D.s, and everyone knows that getting a Ph.D. takes a long time.” □