

NEW YORK

Feminism And Orthodoxy, The Second Stage

Rabbinic ordination of women just one of the controversial issues in spotlight at second international conference.

**ELICIA BROWN
AND JONATHAN MARK**

Ronnie Becher felt like an anxious hostess this time last year, wondering whether "everyone was going to show up to the party."

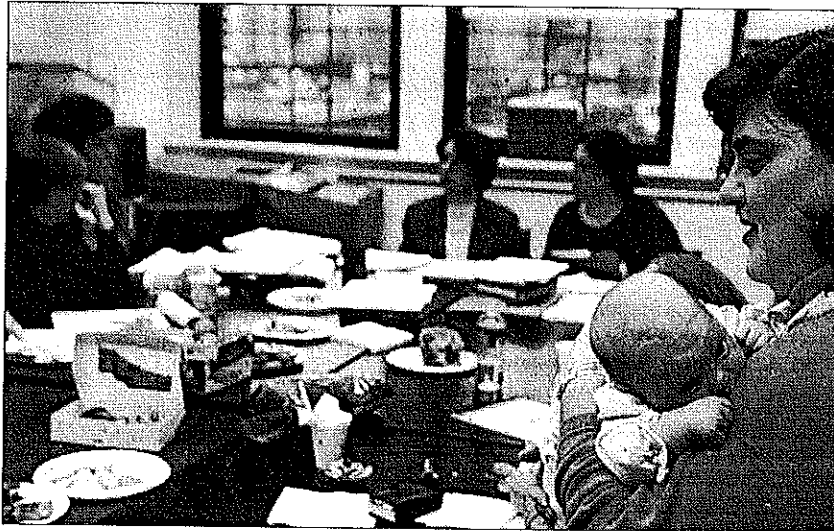
But the party — the first International Conference of Feminism and Orthodoxy — succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of Becher and the other organizers, who had modestly predicted a crowd of 400. More than 1,000 people turned out for discussions on topics such as women's prayer groups, the plight of *agunot* and expansion of female roles within the parameters of Jewish law.

This year Blu Greenberg, again the conference chair, predicts more than 1,000 participants at the second gathering this weekend (Feb. 15-16) at the Grand Hyatt.

And in a sign of the growing confidence behind the event, sessions range from such heated subjects as "Our Jewish Sisters: What Can We Learn From Each Other," with speakers from Judaism's liberal movements; to a plenary session on "Gender and Traditional Texts," on approaching liturgy that sometimes seems to demean women; to a session on "Rabbinic Ordination" for women.

"A moment of daring," according to conference co-chair Belda Lindenbaum, allowed

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New beginnings?: "A moment of doing" at one of this year's planning meetings prompted the decision to include a session on women rabbis. Conference co-chair Bat Sheva Marcus is shown here with her 5-week-old baby Shalhevetya. *Richard Levine*

the organizers to add this last topic to the program. "We must have had too much punch to drink on that particular afternoon," she joked.

Prior to the 1997 conference, the very idea of Orthodox women rabbis seemed so far off, recalled Greenberg, that it was not even discussed at the planning sessions for last year's event. But "there's a positive new climate now," said Greenberg, "even before the appointment

in Orthodox synagogues in recent months.

Greenberg also notes, however, that "no conference position will come out of this session." And neither of the two panelists at the rabbinic ordination workshop are prepared to show any immediate prospects for Orthodox women rabbis.

One panelist, Adena Berkowitz, a board member of the New Jersey-based Union for

not consider Orthodox — told The Jewish Week she will discuss the status of a UTJ committee that is exploring the possibility of establishing a multi-year program to train women for religious leadership, such as chaplaincy or teaching. The positions would differ from the rabbinate in ways that "a solicitor and a barrister are of equal stature but with different expectations."

The other panelist, Rabbi Adam Mintz of Lincoln Square Synagogue, said he will tell the workshop in no uncertain terms, "a woman cannot be ordained."

Rabbi Mintz recently appointed a woman as "congregational intern" with limited par-rabbinic responsibilities within his synagogue, but he defends the internship as "a female model of synagogue leadership."

Other sessions, examining topics such as women's prayer groups and *agunot*, or women whose husbands refuse to give them a religious divorce, may seem more forward thinking. The women's prayer group movement picked up steam last year, with an expanded Women's Tefilla Network and the creation of two weekday prayer groups — one at Columbia University, the other in Israel. And at the conference this weekend, rather than merely introducing the concept, Becher and Barnard College senior Judith Sambol will discuss the nuts and bolts of starting a prayer group.

Although progress on the prayer front has

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been more painstaking, the development of a *bet din* in Queens focused on helping such women (started just prior to the 1997 conference) prompted a decision to shift the focus from stories of individual agony to a conversation on how the community can find practical solutions to ease the pain.

This weekend's conference also seems bound to speak even more directly to specific cross-sections of Orthodoxy. Responding to comments made by 1997 participants to be more inclusive of the unmarried, sessions include "Single Women: Issues in the Community" and "Orthodox Women on the College Campus." Other discussions will focus on the female convert, the ultra-Orthodox woman and working mothers.

The organizers also strove to broaden the conference in terms of speakers. This year's roster includes not only stalwarts of centrist Orthodoxy such as Honey Rackman, Rabbi David Silber and Rabbi Saul Berman, but also several right-of-center speakers including Henna White, a Lubavitch chasid, and directors of two Israel-based seminaries, rebbetzins Malka Bina and Chana Henkin.

"We were flooded with requests to speak at this conference," said Bat Sheva Marcus, one of the co-chairs.

But conference planning has not been without ripples.

Alice Shalvi, 71, one of the grande dames of Orthodox feminism, and a member of the conference committee this year and last, recently launched an ideological missile at the conference's very premise by denouncing Orthodoxy and feminism as an impossible fusion, and by quitting Orthodoxy altogether, becoming rector of the Conservative movement's rabbinical seminary in Israel. Meanwhile, she retained her seat on the committee.

Shalvi told *The Jerusalem Report* last month that she can no longer abide by the Orthodox rabbinate's unwillingness "to make halacha compatible with modern norms. ... If you're a feminist and Orthodox, then you're living in denial.

"I've been quietly attending a Conservative synagogue, with a female rabbi, for a while," she said.

"I can't live with [Orthodoxy's] constant negation of women's advancement, with the fact that there are female Supreme Court justices but no female rabbis. I can't take that, it's

crazy. And I can't go on fighting the Orthodox establishment forever."

Nevertheless, Greenberg told *The Jewish Week*, "Alice was not disinvited. She was invited, but not to play the role that she would have otherwise. We did invite her specifically to come and be an honored guest, but she declined.

"I thought our invitation could be an important symbol as to how we are still connected. It's not an issue between us. Some people were set back by her critique of Orthodoxy, but I don't think it threw anybody out of joint. It was one woman's choice to move elsewhere along the spectrum."

However, there was another major deflection on the other side of the spectrum. Amit, the mainstream 85,000-member Orthodox women's group and a sponsor of last year's conference, has withdrawn its sponsorship, saying its mission involves social service and religious Zionism, not religious feminism.

"There was tremendous dissension among the members of the board," said Nechi Shudofsky, Amit national vice president and a conference committee member. The problems "really centered on the word 'feminism' — that was the red flag."

The most dramatic stories of last year's con-

ference, however, belong to individuals, many of them no doubt Amit women who will come again as individuals. Inspired by the sounds of prayer and study of the more than 1,000 participants, many women left with new enthusiasm for daily davening, with a vow to ask rabbis about inscribing tombstones with their mother's as well as father's names, with a promise to recite Kaddish from the women's side of an Orthodox synagogue, or an interest in saying the kiddish at the Shabbat table.

Laura Shaw-Frank, a 29-year-old lawyer, and two Riverdale neighbors were inspired to address the needs of infertility in the Orthodox community. At a conference workshop on the topic, the three had discussed specific needs of Orthodox women trying to have children: the isolation in a community filled with babies, the quest for doctors sensitive to *nidah*, or the laws of family purity that regulate sexual relations between husband and wife.

"But," said Shaw-Frank, stopping at times to talk to one of the youngest feminists coming to the upcoming conference, her 3-month-old daughter Ateret, the infertility group "hasn't really taken off for a good reason." All three women became pregnant. □