

## If There's A Rabbinic Will . . . Where Are The Student Voices?

by Dinah Zeltser

The defining phrase of the first International Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy was coined by Blu Greenberg. "If there's a rabbinic will, there's a halachic way" succinctly summarized the problems, hopes, obstacles and solutions of Orthodox women. Feminism is still considered a four letter word within some circles of Orthodoxy and equality is not a practiced ideal. Twenty years ago when a similar conference was held it didn't even use the word "feminism" in its title. So there has been progress, but women are still denied leadership roles within the religious and spiritual realm of the Orthodox world. Recent attempts to create a safe spiritual space for Orthodox women within the bounds of halacha (Jewish law) and without the presence of men have been more than merely discouraged—they have been denigrated. Women have been stoned at the place holiest to Jews, the Kotel. A group of rabbis in Queens, who usually supervise kashrut, banned a women's prayer group that meets at a private home. The problem of *agunot*, women whose husbands refuse to grant them a divorce thereby prohibiting them from remarrying, has not been addressed properly by the rabbinic authorities. This ancient patriarchal law causes immense pain to many families.

These were the issues addressed at the conference held in New York City over Presidents' Weekend. Attendance was over 1000 women, mostly from the metropolitan area. It was a pleasant surprise to see men, especially younger men, not only as speakers but also as attendees. Russell Hoffman, 26, a grad student at Furkoff School of Psychology put it in perspective: "Women's issues are people's issues. There is no way to separate Jewish women from the context of living with Jewish men." Hoffman heard about the conference through his wife and came because he considers himself an Orthodox feminist.

Tobin Belzer, a 25 year old graduate student at Brandeis studying sociology and women's studies, was raised secular but considers herself transdenominational. She found out about the conference from an Orthodox friend and came to be a part of history. As a sociologist she wants

to know what Orthodox women are thinking. She was surprised that Orthodox feminism exists at all. She discovered that there is no agreed definition of feminism among Orthodox Jews, a common situation among different communities. Most surprising of all was that there were a number of women in attendance who didn't consider themselves feminists.

The conference addressed a variety of issues. There were workshops on the personal realm of being a Jewish woman that touched upon issues such as head covering, mikvah, and kol isha. Others addressed religious and spiritual issues including life-cycle ceremonies, rosh chodesh, and the Women of the Wall. There were learning sessions on historical women. The Jewish press

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was called upon to discuss the role it plays in women's issues. Debra Nussbaum Cohen, a reporter for the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, asserted that the press gives Orthodox women a voice that they don't usually have and is able to have a profound influence on the community. Unfortunately, rabbis are often moved to action only after they feel the heat from the press.

The status of the rabbinate was discussed at length. Rabbi David Silber, the director of Drisha, an institute of Jewish higher learning for women, called for equal opportunities in learning for women. He is working along with other rabbis to create a position of leadership for women since the Orthodox movement does not recognize women rabbis. According to Rabbi Avi Weiss, a pulpit rabbi and the author of "Women in

Prayer," the rabbinate establishment should not really exist for men either since no true rabbi exists. Weiss pointed out that rabbis were anointed at the time of the Temple in Jerusalem and since its destruction can not be anointed. Instead, women should fill a position called "poseket," or an expert in halacha. Rabbi Seth Berman, a professor at Stern College for Women at Yeshiva University challenged the women at the conference. It is within Orthodox women's rights to pray daily and to learn. When we do not use our rights, Berman told the crowd, they are taken away from us. Perhaps if women reclaim their rights, the rabbis will find Greenberg's "halachic way" by reviewing the halacha and interpreting it in new ways.

Elisheva Rover, a senior at Brandeis University, came to the conference in order to reconcile the tension she feels between women's progress in the world and their lack of progress in the Orthodox community. She came to see fellow Jewish women who are struggling with this contradiction and to see a coalescence of individuals and small groups into a community. "It's one thing to think of these issues on an individual basis," said Queens College senior Miriam Kramer. "But it's a whole other dimension when individuals come together and analyze these issues and their ramifications for the future."

Unfortunately the voices of Kramer and Rovner were not heard at the conference. There were many enthusiastic students in attendance, but not one of the optional workshops was devoted to Orthodox women on the college campus. Neither was the issue of male/female relationships addressed. It might be that when theology is being rewritten it becomes difficult to keep the concerns of all members of the community in focus. Hopefully in the future student voices will be heard because young people remain an integral piece of this burgeoning movement.

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