GENDER AND JUDAISM

The Transformation of Tradition

Edited by
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Chapter 16

The Geopolitics of Jewish Feminism

Alice Shalvi

As one who travels frequently between Israel, Western Europe, and North America, as I have been doing during the past fifteen years, I cannot fail to be impressed by the enormous difference in kind and quantity of Jewish women's activity in each of these three regions.[1] In the United States, the Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s, many of the pioneers and leaders of which were Jewish, led increasing numbers of women to seek self-fulfillment in paid employment rather than devoting themselves to the home and family—the traditional focus and sphere of women's and most particularly (due to family pressures, social norms, and peer rivalry) of Jewish women's lives.

Feminism found expression not only in changing lifestyles but also in academic research, which illuminated areas of knowledge in history, sociology, psychology, and literature previously deemed unworthy of academic inquiry, while also bringing new perspectives to bear on areas previously addressed only from a male viewpoint. Feminist interpretation gradually attained legitimacy and perhaps nowhere has its impact been more revisionary and revolutionary than in the areas of religious knowledge, spiritual experience, and ritual practice.

Fortunate in the overall high educational level of U.S. Jewry, the rich diversity and the essential pluralism of U.S. Judaism, where the reform and conservative movements gained supremacy long before the Women's Movement arose, American Jewish women entered areas which were previously all-male preserves, demanding the right to study

and be ordained as rabbis and cantors, donning *tallitot* (prayer shawls), putting on *tefillin* (phylacteries) and changing the language of traditional liturgy both to embrace the female sex and to eliminate gender specification. Even within the Orthodox sector of U.S. Jewish society, women devised new rituals and revived old, forgotten customs, celebrating *Rosh Hodesh*, marking *bat mitzvah*, performing girl baby naming ceremonies, reciting *tehinnah* (supplication).

Even enumerating only a select number of key events and presents milestones of U.S. Jewish feminism introduces an impressive and varied list:

1971	The founding of *Ezrat Nashim*.
1972	Ordination of the first woman Reform rabbi.
1973	First National Conference of Jewish Women.
1973	Special edition of *Response*, emanating from previous conference.
1976	Elizabeth Kolton, ed. *The Jewish Women*; Baum, Hyman, and Michel, eds. *The American Jewish Women*.
1981	Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism*.
1982	The Women's *Tefilla* Network founded.
1983	Susannah Heschel, ed. *On Being a Jewish Feminist*; Susan Weidman Schneider, *Jewish and Female*.
1984	Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law*.
1985	Jewish Theological Seminary decision to ordain women.

More recently there has been a true plethora of publications, conferences, catalogues, and films. Between February and April 1993 there were at least three major conferences on themes related to Jewish women, one sponsored by CLAL, another at Brandeis University, and another under the auspices of the Melton Center for Jewish Studies at Ohio State, intended inter alia to mark the twentieth anniversary of the first National Conference of Jewish Women.

The most revolutionary and radical element in all this activity was the questioning not only of the patriarchal nature of Judaism but even its very androcentricity, the masculinity of the godhead—acts involving revisioning and revising the basic tenets and premises that have underlain Judaism for over three millennia. To a large extent, I believe, this particular aspect of Jewish feminist activity was made possible by comparable work on other religions. An audaciously radical work such as Judith Plaskow's *Standing Again at Sinai* could, I submit, have been written nowhere but in the country of Mary Daly.

Women's infiltration of the male-dominated sphere of Jewish communal life has, however, been slower and less significant, possibly because this, rather than the synagogue, is where the true power of U.S. Jewry lies—a power that derives as much, if not more, from wealth as from ability or intellect. One Shoshana Cardin hardly makes an egalitarian summer, and although a few women serve in key positions in local and regional federations and even in national bodies, the number of women Combined Jewish Philanthropy (CJF) and United Jewish Appeal (UJA) leaders and decision-makers remains totally out of proportion to the vast number active at a lower and more menial level.

Significantly, to my mind, Hadassah—the largest women's Zionist organization—is distinctly non-feminist in its policy and activities, although in recent years its Jewish Studies department has begun to deal with feminist issues. The largest Jewish women's organization in the United States., the National Council of Jewish Women, is not Zionist and is primarily concerned with general social issues, not with Jewish ones. In other words, no large Jewish women's national organization combines a feminist outlook with primarily Jewish or Zionist activities.

In Western Europe the only numerically significant Jewish community today is in France, where the tremendous influx of Jews from North Africa has brought about a remarkable renaissance of Jewish life and religious practice, far exceeding what was previously achieved by the Ashkenazim. New and vibrant communities have sprung up where none previously existed, while older ones, such as those in Paris, Nice, and Lyon, have been resuscitated and augmented.

What is most significant about the younger generation of women in the community is that, having obtained a far better education than that which would have been theirs had they remained in Algeria, Tunisia, or Morocco or even come to Israel, many are choosing to do research precisely on the anthropology and sociology of their now-defunct communities. This was brought home to me most forcibly when I attended a conference on the Jewish Woman in Paris in December 1988. *Halakhah*, ritual, and women's status in Judaism at large were addressed only by the two guest speakers from abroad, Blu Greenberg and myself. Almost all the other presentations dealt with customs and traditions in the "old country." Actually, two works on women and Judaism had just been published, one by Janine Gdalya (the organizer of the conference), the other by journalist Renee David; but these were not the themes that interested the younger women, few if any of whom were religiously observant.

In Switzerland there is currently (Spring 1993) an interesting dispute that in many ways reflects that country's backwardness in admitting women into political and public life. The Basel *kehillah* is debating whether a woman may be elected president of the community. Following the submission of material sent by the Israel Women's Network on the status of this debate in Israel, where the High Court has ruled on the subject, the local rabbi has agreed that in principle an outstandingly gifted woman might be eligible for this totally non-*halakhic* post, but the implication is that no sufficiently remarkable creature has as yet appeared on the communal scene.

The United Kingdom provides a fascinating example of the debilitating nature of an essentially nonpluralistic community, over which a monolithic rabbinical establishment holds sway. Though there is a fairly strong ultra-orthodox presence in London and in certain cities in north-east England, and whereas a growing number of Jews are joining the Reform and Masorati (Conservative) movements, the vast majority of affiliated Jews belong to the establishment United Synagogue, not least because only through synagogue membership can one ensure burial in one of the country's Jewish cemeteries.

The United Synagogue is headed by the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, a post which because of the favor in which Margaret Thatcher held the previous incumbent, Rabbi Immanuel Jacobovits led to this elevation to a peerage and seat in the House of Lords, like the Archbishop's of Canterbury and York, who head the establishment Church of England. Although he is an outspoken dove as far as the Israeli-Arab conflict is concerned and has done important work in medical ethics, he is not noted for his sympathy for women's ambitions in the area of reform or ritual participation. His (communally very active) wife is emphatic in her criticism of what she perceives as unseemly feminist tendencies.

Although, in common with trends in the general population, a smaller percentage of Jewish women achieve higher education in the United Kingdom. than in the United States, in the mid-1980s a growing number of university-educated women began to feel disenfranchised. Several of them were professionally engaged in Jewish education and increasingly dissatisfied at their inability to apply their considerable knowledge of Judaism and Judaic studies to their advancement within the synagogue or even the community at large. Just before Purim 1988, I introduced a group of them to the notion of *Rosh Hodesh* as a regular focal point for study, discussion, and possibly even ritual revival. When I was invited to the same home on *Rosh Hodesh* Tammuz over a year

later, I was amazed and delighted to discover that the seed sown at that first meeting had fallen on fertile ground and, carefully tended by a few dedicated leaders, it had produced in the greater London area alone a whole crop of *Rosh Hodesh* groups that met regularly and worked diligently. In September 1992 these groups held a Shabbaton, with full prayer and Torah reading, expertly conducted by the women, who omitted those "sacred sayings" (*devarim she'be'kedusha*) for which a *minyan* (prayer quorum) is required.

Following this weekend, the women of the Stanmore community in northwest London received permission from their rabbi to hold a similar all-women's service on the synagogue premises, but news of their plans leaked out to the Chief Rabbi, who promptly forbade holding the service. He later permitted it to take place in a private home, with Torah reading from a book but not from a Torah scroll. The women acceded to his ruling, but the entire incident had stirred up an enormous controversy within the Anglo-Jewish community, which seems set to further weaken the increasingly shaky authority of the Chief Rabbi.

The current Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, in 1992 established a commission to report on the status and role of women in the community, which is due to submit its report in September 1993. If, as seems highly likely, this report is critical of the current state of affairs, he may well find himself at an impasse, caught between his alleged commitment to implementing the commission's recommendations and the conservatism of a reactionary all-male *bet din*.

Meanwhile, in June 1993, the Traditional *Rosh Hodesh* group joined forces with the Reform Movement's women's group, *The Half-Empty Bookcase*, to establish a Jewish Women's Network. At the some time, a Women's Aid Society has been established to help victims of domestic violence. So Jewish women in the United Kingdom are clearly on the move, at last.

And so to Israel, to contemplate a veritable *Via Dolorosa* of women's liberation. Let me begin by confessing that for the first twenty five years of statehood the myth of equality between the sexes held the majority of Israeli women in thrall, so that we complacently believed we were in no need of a liberation movement. That myth had its source in such potent symbols as women pioneers and kibbutz members ploughing the land, women soldiers fighting alongside men, and Golda Meir. The fact that an unduly large proportion of the neo-feminists who became active in the early 1970s were Anglo Saxons further encouraged

the widely held belief that this was a foreign import that had no place in Israeli society.

At the beginning of 1973 the Jerusalem branch of the Association of University Women launched a series of study sessions on the status of women in Judaism. This was at the initiative of Priscilla Fishman, whose daughters Talya and Leora were then involved in U.S. Jewish feminist activities. I joined the group because I had just experienced an eye-opening instance of discrimination at the University of the Negev, where I was denied a senior administrative post (for which I was the best candidate) solely on the (explicitly stated) grounds that I was a woman. That experience led me to compare notes with female colleagues at the Hebrew University and, in turn, to the establishment of a caucus of women faculty members who demanded and obtained important changes in policy (e.g. the abolition of anti-nepotism rules discriminating against women; a longer trial period in which to publish adequately, for mothers of young children; equity in grants for the spouses of male and female faculty on research fellowships abroad, etc.) It also led me to deliver what, in retrospect, I see as the first piece of Israeli feminist literary criticism—a paper on *Sexual Politics in "Troilus and Cressida,"* the reception of which further heightened my awareness of how deeply embedded traditional notions of sex-based divisions and differences are in Israel.

The Yom Kippur War of 1973-74 shocked the government into an awareness of the extent to which women had been relegated to secondary roles in the Israel economy and the concomitant danger of this in times of national emergency, when all the (male-only) reserves were conscripted. One result of this (belated) recognition of reality was the establishment in 1975 (U.N. International Year of the Woman) of a commission of inquiry, headed by M. K. Ora Namir, which for the first time collected and collated reliable data on women's status in Israel. Significantly and perhaps predictably (as the remainder of my account will further clarify) the only one of the ten working committees into which the commission was divided that failed to function and was rapidly disbanded was that on women and *halakhah*, composed primarily of rabbis and lawyers, the latter of whom included Shulamit Aloni, already an outspoken opponent of *halakhic* authority.

The fall of the Labor government in 1977 was the primary, though not the sole, reason for the non-implementation of the majority of the commission's 241 recommendations, once these were submitted in February 1978. But consciousness had been raised and complacency irrevocably dispelled, particularly among the members of the

commission, which comprised most of the leading women members of the community—professionals, politicians and activists in the various women's organizations.

Meanwhile, and subsequently, a number of events occurred of greater and lesser importance on both the personal and public level. In 1975 I became principal of the *Pelech School for Religious Girls*, which I rapidly turned into an even more progressive establishment than it had already been when the oldest of my three daughters joined it in 1973. The only religious school in which Talmud was a compulsory subject for girls, in 1977 it became the first to employ a woman to teach this subject—Beverly Gribetz, a new immigrant from the United States, who gave me the names of *Ezrat Nashim* activists Judith Hauptman and Arlene Agus as people I must meet on my first visit to New York that year. In them I found kindred spirits, religiously observant women who had dared to challenge conventions and premises developed over many centuries, and from them I gained courage to try to follow suit upon my return to Israel.

In 1978, Bar-Ilan University devoted its annual Contemporary Jewry Conference to Women and Judaism and this was my first encounter with Cynthia Ozick and Blu Greenberg. It also provided the setting for an amusing example of rabbinical evasion when Judy Hauptman gave a Talmud *Shi'ur* on Shabbat in the *bet ha-midrash* at Kibbutz Lavie, through the open windows of which we could see Rabbi Shear-Yashuv Cohen (now Chief Rabbi of Haifa) pacing up and down on the balcony, obviously with at least one ear open to the proceedings, while behind him Judy's husband wheeled their baby carriage!

In 1981 the Hebrew University's Senate finally approved the establishment of a unit of Gender Differences in Society. In 1982 Haifa University established a unit for Women's Studies and hosted the first international, intercultural, interdisciplinary "Women's Worlds" conference, which has since been held trienially, each time in a different country. In 1983 the Jerusalem Drama Workshop, an all-women theater group, first performed *Ma'seh Bruria*, the fruit of a long period of Talmud study on the part of the playwright, Aliza Israeli-Elyon; the two actresses; and the woman director, Joyce Miller, and the first of what have become a series of text-based productions. In spring 1984 Susannah Heschel delivered two lectures on Women and Judaism at Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem and, to the ill-concealed astonishment of the academic director of this august institution, drew capacity audiences.

In August 1984, the topic of the American Jewish Congress' annual U.S.-Israel Dialogue was "Woman as Jew, Jew as Woman: An Urgent Enquiry." To the surprise of the organizers, this was to prove a landmark in the development of Israeli feminist activity. It brought together a group of Jewish feminists from the United States (including Betty Friedan, Blu Greenberg, Cynthia Ozick, Elizabeth Holtzman, Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, Jacqueline Levin and other luminaries) to meet with a group of Israelis, primarily academicians expert in various areas of women's studies (such as Galia Golan, Frances Raday, and Dafna Izraeli), but also including Brigadier General Amira Dotan, head of the Women's Corps in the IDF, and one or two lawyers from Na'amat and WIZO, who were chosen for their professional expertise rather than on the basis of organizational membership.

Never in the twenty years of these annual dialogues had there been so electric an atmosphere; never had so many (women) members of the general public demanded to be allowed to attend what were normally closed dialogue sessions; never before had the normally rather innocuous discussions resulted in a series of action-oriented resolutions. Nor did any such dialogue before or since 1984 end with a march through the streets of Jerusalem, as we marched (or rather, walked as unobtrusively as possible for group of about 100 women) to the King David Hotel, whence we refused to be ejected until we had delivered our list of demands to Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Shamir, who were even then debating which of the two should have first turn at being prime minister after the "hung" Knesset elections of the previous month. That afternoon, glowing with euphoria at having actually achieved our immediate goal, a number of us decided to act on Frances Raday's suggestion that we establish a women's lobby, an organization that would be affiliated to no one party, but would have as its overall aim the furthering of women's status and the ultimate achievement of equality between the sexes. And so the Israel Women's Network was born, the direct outcome of vibrant interaction between American and Israeli feminists.

Following a series of "speak-outs" around the country, we rapidly concluded that reform of the rabbinical courts must be a top priority, but this was to take on a deeply entrenched, all-male and on the whole religiously fundamentalist establishment and to engage in a struggle that has reached its apex in 1993-94, in the international Year of the Agunah and the establishment of International Coalition of Agunah Rights (ICAR), which, uniquely, has brought together a very wide range of Jewish women's organizations in Israel and abroad.

Other conflicts with the rabbinical establishment were less directly concerned with *halakhah* and more with preconceptions regarding the role of women in public bodies that form part of the religious establishment in Israel. Thus, it took a High Court decision in 1987 to enable Leah Shakdiel, a highly knowledgeable and religiously observant woman, to take her seat on the Religious Services Council in Yeroham, to which she had been democratically elected, and a further High Court decision, also in 1987, to enable two women municipal councilors to serve on the electoral board that chose the Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv-Jaffa. It is worth noting that in 1993 there was no need for court action when two women were included on the electoral board to choose the Chief Rabbis of Israel, even though one of the candidates was the same one who six years earlier had threatened to withdraw his candidacy if there were women on the electoral board in Tel Aviv.

In December 1987, Pnina Peli, a pioneer of women's prayer groups in Israel, organized a conference on Women and *Halakhah*, at which most of the presenters were U.S. women and Israeli men. Once again, divorce law proved a focus for acrimonious charges and countercharges and many noted with considerable indignation the patronizing tone of the few orthodox rabbis who deigned to address the plenary sessions.

A year later, the First International Jewish Feminist Conference was held in Jerusalem. Co-sponsored by the American Jewish Congress and the Israel Women's Network, it led to sharp conflict between the Israelis and Americans regarding agenda and content: the Americans didn't want to discuss the *intifada*, whereas the Israelis were offended by the "pre-emptive strike" that led to a pre-conference demonstration on the "Who is a Jew?" issue. Instead of the postconference establishment of international Jewish women's network, as was rather grandiosely proposed, there were two totally unplanned outcomes: the physical assault by ultra-orthodox men on the group of conference participants who held a service at the Western Wall led to the establishment of the *Women of the Wall*, on whose petition to be permitted to pray publicly at this national site the High Court has yet to rule; and the exclusion of the Israel-Arab conflict from the conference agenda led to a postconference meeting of Israeli and Palestinian Women, which in turn brought about the establishment of the *Women's Peace Network* (*Reshet*). (My active involvement in the Peace Net led to my resignation from *Pelech* in July 1990. The Religious Branch of the Ministry Education found my "pro-Palestinian" activities coupled with my anti-clerical feminism too much to swallow and threatened to withdraw accreditation if I remained in my job.)

Women's spirituality and women's religious ritual, so prominent in Jewish feminist discourse and activism in the United States, and now in the United Kingdom, are not the acknowledged agenda of Israeli feminists. There has been a significant increase in advanced Torah study among modern orthodox women, spearheaded by mothers of *Pelech* pupils who wished to emulate their daughters. This has resulted in the establishment of a number of institutions where orthodox women study Talmud or other texts (e.g. Bruria College and the Woman's Institute for Torah Studies, MATAN). Aviva Zornberg has emerged as an outstanding teacher of the Bible, but she also teaches only in English and has hence acquired a smaller number of disciples than the renowned Nehama Leibowitz.

Increased study and subsequent knowledge have led to a certain increase in celebratory ritual: *Simhat Bat* to mark the birth of a girl; *bat mitzvah* involving study and often a *drasha,* not merely a party; *Rosh Hodesh* groups; and women's *ushpizin*. Some academic research has been done: by Susan Sered on rituals among Kurdish women; by Tamar Elor on women in the *haredi* community; and by Ilana Pardes on the Bible, but there are no university courses related to women and Judaism, nor were we able to elicit the required support for an international conference on women theologians (which I proposed in 1986). However, in 1992 the Progressive Movement in Israel ordained its first woman rabbi, Na'ama Kelman, and this year the Masorati Movement in Israel has finally decided to follow the Jewish Theological Seminary's suit and ordain women.

What is of supreme importance in Israel and is at last having a very real impact on women's status in the country is political action. The Gulf War of 1991, like the Yom Kippur War almost twenty years earlier, brought home to women most forcibly the extent to which they were expected by society at large and by the government in particular to bear the double burden of homemaking on the one hand, and active participation in the workforce on the other; that is, to fulfill two roles that, at time of war and given the total closure of the school and child-care system, proved irreconcilable with each other. Coupled with a sharp increase in domestic violence and spousal murder, which that year reached an unprecedented forty-one women killed, the Gulf War experience led women to realize they must be more actively engaged in the actual decision-making process. A Women Voters' Registration Operation conducted by the Israel Women's Network led to a marked increase in women's membership in political parties and to vociferous demands for greater representation of women in each party's list of

candidates for the Knesset elections in June 1992. As a result, the number of women MKs increased from eight to eleven, all of whom openly declare themselves feminists and are working together across party lines to improve women's status through legislation.

The fight for greater rights for women inevitably encounters the opposition of the religious parties and the religious establishment. Thus one cannot avoid the melancholy conclusion that so long as religion and politics are inextricably intertwined and the state-sanctioned (and state-financed) religious establishment remains exclusively orthodox, with no official possibility of pluralism, the majority of Israelis will remain alienated from Jewish religious tradition and women will remain marginal in everything pertaining to that tradition. The only hope for change lies in an influx from North America of Conservative and Reform Jews who care passionately for religious pluralism and will constitute a substantial portion of the electorate favoring separation of religion and state.

It appears to me to be the inescapable conclusion of the (albeit superficial and personal) account presented here that, in accordance with the well-known dictum *Wie es Christelt sich, azoy Yidelt's sich* (roughly translated: When in Rome, do as the Romans do), what occurs within Jewish society is profoundly influenced by and approximates what occurs within the host society. When the latter is pluralistic in nature, with no central religious establishment or ruling religious caste, the Jewish minority can be equally pluralistic and decentralized. This explains the extraordinary vigor of U.S. Jewry (despite the prevalence of intermarriage and assimilation) and, within U.S. Jewry, of Jewish feminism. In the United Kingdom, an official rabbinical establishment hampers comparable development, and there is not as strong a general feminist tradition to encourage Jewish feminism; consequently it lags behind that in the United States. Most depressing of all is the situation in Israel, where a strong, fundamentalist religious establishment, enjoying increasing political power in the legislature and the government, is able to strangle at birth any nascent religious feminism and even to frustrate women's fight for equal rights in secular life wherever that impinges in any way on religious "principles" or *halakhah*, as in the case of abortion.

Nevertheless, incorrigible optimist that I am, I have a strong feeling that, with feminism and egalitarianism alive and well in Israel today, Israeli Jewish feminism (i.e., feminist activity related to women's role and status within Jewish religion in a Jewish State) is waiting to be born.

Perhaps *you*—the feminists of North America—will be its surrogate parents?

NOTE

1. What follows is not an academic survey, but rather a personal account of an ongoing process that I have observed over the past twenty years and of which I have been privileged to some extent to be a part. Hence the overly-profuse use of the first-person singular. It seems I just had the good luck to be in the right place at the right time.