



# Male

Since feminism, women have begun to occupy all roles of our committees, minyans, synagogues, regional boards and national organizations. While glass ceilings still remain, the tide of equal opportunity and access continues to rise, and the lessons of gender equity are accepted by almost all members of our communities. The Reform Movement has valiantly led the religious world by including women in almost every area of synagogue and movement life. Even (most of) our most old-fashioned congregants have accepted, and even come to celebrate, a woman rabbi.

Yes, we have heard feminism's call for equal access, but some of us have failed to completely heed a central part of the feminist message: gender matters. It affects the way we see the world, relate to community and connect with God. Gender influences our self awareness, our personal relationships, and our intimacies. For most of our community, this message falls on deaf ears. When a segment of our community does apprehend and perceive the power of gender, women dominate that segment. These women create Rosh Hodesh groups, women's liturgy, new women's life cycle ceremonies or even a women's *tikkun olam* committee to focus on issues like breast cancer.

But men continue to largely ignore the spiritual significance of gender. Reform men certainly have sensitively heard the message of equal access and respect, and despite their courageous dedication to equal opportunity, most men still fail to recognize that feminism contains a powerful lesson for Jewish men as well. We do not argue here that men deserve greater inclusion or equal rights. This is not a "pendulum-has-swung-too-far" argument. Instead, men need to hear more of the feminist message and go beyond the women's rights piece of the communal puzzle. Gender matters, feminists have taught us, but rarely do we consider how significantly masculinity affects the way we live our Jewish lives.

We are not the first writer to consider the situation of the modern Jewish man.

# Gender Awareness

by Rabbi Michael Garret Holzman

Books on Jewish masculinity(ies) have been appearing since 1988, beginning with Harry Brod's *A Mensch Among Men* (out of print). While books may intellectually ponder Jewish Manhood, their readers have yet to incorporate those ideas into the way we run our synagogues. In contrast to the alterations made due to female gender concerns, men have yet to realize that our gender matters in the way we plan our programs, lead our services, write our liturgy and celebrate our lives. As synagogue attendance (and even youth group participation) becomes more and more female, perhaps we should consider how our communities could better speak to men's souls. This requires a complete, radical acceptance that gender matters to men as much as to women. As one generation has come of age fully immersed in identity politics, this should come as no surprise. Just as women have a need to speak of self-consciously women's programs, services and groups, so too do men have a similar need.

While this goal derives from feminism's ideology, it seems to dismantle against the fixtures of gender erasure that well-meaning men and women have struggled to install in the liberal American synagogue. Some fear that the creation of male spaces means a slide back to female exclusion, but this fear reflects a perspective that has not fully absorbed the power of the feminist shift in the Jewish community. In today's community, to imagine that men have the power to exclude preserves the vision of men as the normative bearers of Jewish tradition, an antiquated and distasteful perspective that few of us would consciously adopt. Building awareness of male spiritual needs into our program has no more power to exclude than the same awareness of female needs. In fact, by self-consciously speaking of men in gendered terms, we elevate the awareness that both men *and* women have particular needs, a lesson that feminists have been teaching for a generation. An awareness of particularly male needs moves men from the norm of Jewish tradition to living as one of two equal gender alternatives.

An example of this type of thinking surfaced recently when a student at HUC-JIR asked, "Does anyone really believe that the simchat bat is equal to a *bris*?" Although we have been aiming for over three decades to create a female ceremony equal to the male birth ritual (considering everything from the washing of the feet to

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the ritual piercing of the hymen), at least this student still feels a disparity. Despite our efforts, the *bris* still remains the norm in our communal psychology. The word *bris* even appropriates all "covenant" as male.

Equality for baby girls remains elusive because we miss the blatant point staring us right in the face as we expose the genitals of our baby boys. This is a male covenant ceremony, perhaps the most male of ceremonies. Even if we think circumcision is barbaric, we can all agree that it is male. For some reason, even the most ancient of men, men probably preceding even Israelite men, connected their communal identity with the most male part of our anatomy. Even the most creative liturgists and ritualists in our midst could not design a more male ceremony if we tried.

Nevertheless we shy away from describing the *bris* as such. Rarely do we hear of "welcoming this boy into the community of Jewish men," even though Jewish women have been similarly welcoming girls for a generation. In our well-meaning attempts to promote equality and erase gender difference, we pretend that the gender of this ritual is invisible, and in so

doing, we preserve its status as normative in the Jewish tradition. Two centuries ago, Jews did not need to call *brit milah* explicitly male, because they understood the covenant to be carried implicitly by men. But today we surely do not deny the covenant to baby girls and adult women, yet the male covenant ceremony remains normative.

By overtly treating a *brit milah* as a male ceremony we do not exclude women any more than does the anatomy of the ritual. Instead we acknowledge the one-sidedness of *milah*, which, in turn, acknowledges the Jewish universality of *brit*. In addition, creating a consciously male ceremony—by recognizing men in the community, honoring fathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers and sons, inventing male symbols and rituals, and blessing our sons with the names of men in our tradition "like Ephraim and Menasseh"—reminds everyone in the room, male and female, of the centrality of gender to identity. And by honoring the particularity of identity, we speak to the individual's experience of God.

The *brit milah* serves as only one discrete example of the way that male gender erasure diminishes the efficacy of Judaism for men and further marginalizes women. In the way that women have honored femininity they teach all of us the power of speaking to central parts of the self. But, unfortunately, this honoring remains alternative, unbalanced and marginal to the Jewish norm. The "women's group" floats around the periphery of Jewish consciousness, because we have not yet fully acknowledged as a community that gender matters for all of us. When men fully adopt the lessons of feminism and learn a language of meaning that honors masculinity, not only will we fully achieve equality for women, but we will better serve, heal and uplift the male soul.

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