

Where Do We Go From Here? One Woman's Perspective...

by Rabbi Elyse Goldstein



There is no doubt that the proliferation of women's study groups, Rosh Chodesh groups, and resources for those exploring the issues of gender and Judaism attests to the explosion not only of interest in the subject, but to the extent of seriousness in pursuing it. Twenty years ago, "women and Judaism" courses were a fad, a nod to the populist culture, and an appeasement to "uppity" Sisterhood ladies questioning their traditional role in the synagogue.

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Today, there is hardly a congregation, school, youth group, or women's organization without some scholarly or rabbinic investigation of this topic in its regular curriculum.

Now that we have "women and Judaism" courses, we can see that we have been studying "men and Judaism" all along, mistakenly believing we had been learning "just Judaism." We have assumed that what we received was a neutral form of Judaism.

There is no such thing as “neutral” or “just Judaism,” because by hearing the same stories retold by women by being at the same events led by women, by simply sitting in the pews and looking up to see women in front of us, we have grown to understand that the Judaism we inherited was filtered through men and the male experience.

In the early years of the new studies in “women and Judaism,” the questions centered around equality and equal access, and the early cry of “Jewish women’s lib” was for the same opportunities, responsibilities and access to resources as men. The issue seemed simple enough; the biological differences between men and women should not translate themselves into social barriers. Although men and women differ biologically, they are essentially the same. Thus both proponents and opponents of early “women’s lib” defined equality as sameness.

Today’s “women and Judaism” has entered a second phase. We no longer believe that to be equal to men religiously and spiritually we have to be like men. Indeed the question has come from its original roots in equal access. We now ask if it is possible to *specialize* as women while we *equalize* as women. We want to know if there is a unique “women’s way” of seeing and hearing the text, of practicing the traditions, of living the rituals, that might be different from what we have received. We are no longer so completely convinced that women and men are essentially the same. Do we see and experience the world differently than men do because we are women? Does being female so influence our perceptions of ourselves that it also colors the way we perceive the rest of life and everything around us? If so, how does gender affect our religious life?

Do not assume that “women and Judaism” is no longer an issue, is over and done with, in the egalitarian movements. Though the Reform Movement began ordaining women in the 1970s, with the Reconstructionist and Conservative Movements following suit, the “women and Judaism” question has not gone away with the advent of equal access. For egalitarianism does not insist upon women’s voices as *women* being heard, women’s perspectives as *women* being sought, women’s experiences as *women* being recorded. It assumes a spiritual equality, a halachic equality, even a ritual equality, but it has not yet dealt with the question of *difference*.”...

Men, Sexuality and Integration

The Issues

So much has changed for women in the Jewish world over the last decades that it is tempting to say the “woman’s question” is over. Women are rabbis in the Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist denominations and present in the leadership of Orthodoxy. Women serve as congregational presidents and as directors of national organizations. Jewish education for girls is practically a universal given now in the entire Jewish world. So where do we go from here?

Three areas remain critical challenges for the new generation of female Jewish leadership. One is the challenge of male reaction and male inclusion into the growing network of “women’s spirituality” and the advances of women into Jewish life. The second is the area of Judaism and sexuality and, with the increasing visibility of gays and lesbians in the Jewish world, a growing awareness of their spiritual needs and particular experiences of exclusion and inclusion, as well. And the third is the ultimate task of integrating our female selves with our Jewish selves.

Jewish Masculinity

For many years the Jewish community has held a unique definition of masculinity. While others favored brawn, we valued brains. Our national and historical heroes are rabbis and learned men, statesmen, holy men and miracle workers. Jews never idolized men of physical power, aggression, warfare, or cruelty. Why?

There is a logical historical reason. For so long Jewish men were powerless vis-à-vis the general society, and there was no way to “compete” with the masculine norms of the non-Jewish world. Stripped of their rights to bear arms in a violent society, deprived of voting rights until Emancipation, constrained in their choice of careers and professions, how were Jewish men, non-citizens, non-landed, non-gentry, to define themselves if not in opposition to the prevailing ideas of masculinity in their time? Aviva Cantor writes:

On the one hand, there was necessity for Jewish men to compensate for having been deprived of power vis-à-vis the men of the general society. Exile deprived them of the ability to engage in physical aggression and of using it to defend women and children and the community from attack. Exile reduced men to the powerlessness

associated with women...The rabbis ingeniously resolved this conflict by changing the concept of what constituted male power, and even more fundamentally (since power is part of the definition of manhood) what constituted masculinity. They stripped male power of the glorification and practice of violence, of rugged individualism, rapacious exploitation, machismo, rampant cruelty, conquest, military prowess, physical heroism, and the abuse of women. They redefined power as knowledge, learning and studying. They defined manhood itself in terms of commitment to and achievement in learning Torah. Thus they replaced the classic patriarchal definition of masculinity, of man-as-macho fighter, with the alternative definition of man-as-scholar.

Man-as-scholar became the Jewish form of machismo, and so it essentially remains to this day. But this redefinition was not without its price. To retain some sense of elitism, to be sure the learning of Torah was utterly attractive as a central element of self-definition for men, it also served as a bonding experience for men. The yeshivas thus became places where men would go to “retreat” from the world at large, and also from the world of women. The synagogue, not the battlefield, became the place where men could prove their mettle. This was not possible if women were accorded the same privileges and opportunities there.

Today, many other definitions of masculinity are open to men. The synagogue is no longer a proving ground for masculinity. Because of that, it has also suffered. Many have noticed the “flight” of men from egalitarian synagogues as more and more women take leadership roles. What is this flight about? Is it about the last male bastion being stormed, or about the feeling of not being “needed” anymore, or about a male devaluation of something as soon as it becomes open to women, or about a genuine frustration with the “feminization” of today’s Judaism? These are questions that must be answered by the men who take their Judaism seriously and who wish the next generation of boys to do so as well.

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