

JEWISH ORTHODOX FEMINIST ALLIANCE

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From Our President: New Beginnings

By Carol Kaufman Newman

My mother and I would speak almost every day. Up until her death, at some point during our Monday conversation, she would pause and ask: So, what are you making for *Shabbos*? Invariably, I would get frustrated and explain to her that in fact I hadn't given it a thought and was still eating the leftovers from last Shabbat. (Perhaps in our own small way we were recreating the dispute recorded in the *Mechilta* between the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai relating to the proper time to start preparing for Shabbat. Let's just say, my mother was Shammai.)



Recently, it seems, I have found myself becoming more like my mother—and not only in relation to Shabbat. I have also begun to think about *Rosh Hashanah* earlier and earlier—I think this year it began around *Tisha B'Av*.

I love this time of year. When the month of Elul begins, and we begin reciting Psalm 27, I feel a flutter of

anticipation. I start thinking of new beginnings. How can I be a better person, a better mother and a better friend? How can I re-work my schedule to take more classes at Drisha this year? And how can I find time to read more?

Since assuming the presidency of JOFA, my concerns have grown increasingly beyond the personal. I think about the communal issues that we face: domestic violence, child abuse, chained women who cannot get a Jewish divorce, to name just a few.

It is wonderful what we at JOFA have accomplished in such a short span of time. The questions we have asked and forced others to confront have opened up new and exciting dialogues. But, it is not enough to raise issues. Our real goal is to effect change. And as we try to make ourselves better people, so too JOFA is striving to make the Jewish community more just by being more sensitive to and more inclusive of Jewish women. The number of initiatives we have implemented underscores our commitment to enhancing the dignity of Orthodox Jewish women. And, as our sages have noted, while it is not necessarily our job to finish the task, neither are we free to avoid doing our share of it.

Lately I have come to appreciate the

nature of my mother's Monday question. It was not merely that she was *thinking* about Shabbat. What she wanted to do was actually start the preparation. We, too, must not only think, but act.

There is a tradition in Judaism that we begin our work even if we will not be alive to witness the fruits of our labor. We work so our descendants not yet born will reap the benefits. There is a famous story in the Talmud that teaches us the importance of caring about future generations:

Honi Hamiagel was walking when he saw an old man planting a tree. He asked the man why he was planting a tree since it would take seventy years until fruits appeared and he would not be alive to eat and enjoy them. The man answered: I found the world full of carobs. Like my forefathers planted for me, so will I plant for my children.

In this season of new beginnings, let us appreciate our wonderful tradition. Let us also resolve, this *Rosh Hashanah*, not only to make ourselves better people, but also to make the world we live in a better place.

Shana Tova!

Gazing Inwards on *Rosh Hashanah* By Tammy Jacobowitz

In the midst of the weighty prayers of *Rosh Hashanah*, we pause to read from the Torah and the Prophets. The Torah reading on *Rosh Hashanah*, as on all holidays, departs from the annual cycle of reading, with special selections chosen to match the themes of the day. But the Torah reading is more than an adornment to the rich liturgy of the day; it is a *performative* event, one that invites and demands the congregation's participation. As we listen to the public

reading, our hearts and minds tune into the stories of our biblical parents, gripping us with transformative power. Our challenge is to use these stories as mirrors in order to gaze at our own lives. When we allow ourselves to be open to the full effect of their story, our stories become fused with theirs. In this way, the Torah readings play a significant role in the conscious "makeovers" we construct during the *Yamim Noraim*.

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Gazing Inwards

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Why then do we read about two *akarot* (barren women), Hannah and Sarah, on the first day of *Rosh Hashanah*? What parts of their experience are we challenged to integrate into the particular identities we cultivate on *Rosh Hashanah*?

One traditional response to this question suggests that the readings function as a type of prayer; by invoking the piety and suffering of our matriarchs, we ask God to bestow similar kindness on their descendants. Just as the prayers of Sarah and Hannah were answered, we hope that God will answer our earnest prayers for life, health and forgiveness. The Talmud in Tractate *Rosh Hashanah* 11a asserts an even stronger link: “On *Rosh Hashanah*, Sarah, Rachel and Hannah were answered.” Our reading is timed to maximize divine compassion; we ask God to reenact past kindness on this very day.

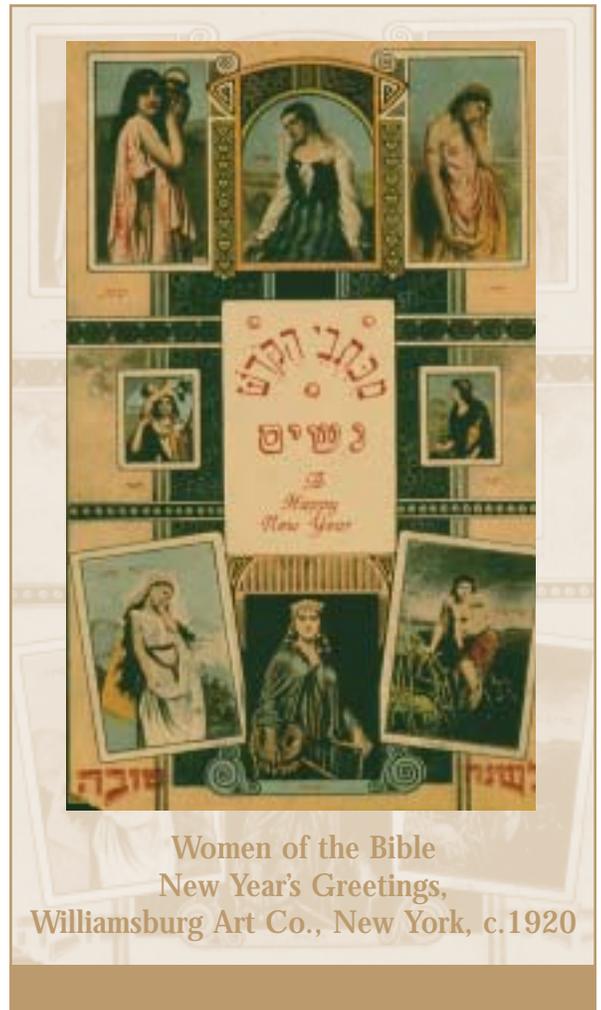
But it is not merely that God

responds positively to the pleas of the barren women (and hopefully to our own). We gain a better sense of the connections of barrenness (*akarut*) and *Rosh Hashanah* by understanding the intensity and intimacy of the prayer experience of the *akarot* themselves.

To be sure, prayer indelibly marks the depiction of the *akarot* in both biblical and rabbinic literature. Hannah, the mother of Samuel is the first recorded person in the Bible to offer a personal prayer in a public place. In fact, the rabbis of the Talmud derive a series of rules of prayer based on her model. Hannah’s story, which is narrated in chapters one and two of the first book of Samuel, includes several prayers: a prayer of bitter tears (1:10), a solemn vow (1:11), an extensive silent prayer (1:12) and a poetic exultation in God’s kindness (2:1-10). Her final prayer, offered after the birth of her child, bears witness to a critical shift in her thoughts: from the private concerns of an ailing woman to the shared, global experience of God’s creatures.

Rebecca and Rachel’s stories, too, are marked by prayer. The terse account of Rebecca’s barrenness, captured in a single verse, relates the fervent prayer of Isaac “on behalf of his wife,” so powerful that it succeeds in undoing the decree of barrenness. In that very same verse, “the Lord responded to his plea, and his wife Rebecca conceived.” A *midrash* in *Bereishit Rabbah* (63:5) responding to the difficult expression “on behalf of his wife,” which can also mean “opposite his wife,” paints a poignant picture of heartfelt, mutual, emphatic prayer:

Isaac prostrated himself in one spot and she in another [opposite him], and he prayed to God: ‘Sovereign of the Universe! May all the children which Thou wilt grant me be from this righteous woman.’ And she too prayed likewise.



Women of the Bible
New Year's Greetings,
Williamsburg Art Co., New York, c.1920

In this reading, Rebecca and Isaac pray simultaneously from a place of deep respect and mutuality. In their case, the experience of *akarut* drew them together as a couple, united in their gaze towards God.

Rachel and Jacob do not fare quite as well in coordinated prayer. At first, Rachel directs her frustration towards Jacob, demanding, “Give me children, or I shall die.” Jacob, angered by her accusation, redirects Rachel towards God, nudging her to recognize God as the one responsible for her womb. Although Rachel’s prayers are not recorded in the biblical text, the moment of conception is couched in terms of covenantal memory and divine hearkening: “Now God remembered Rachel; God heeded her and opened her womb...” Her prayers are answered.

Throughout the *midrash*, the rabbis give voice to a persistent quandary: why were so many of the matriarchs barren? Aside from the uncanny repetition of *akarut*, the question reflects the

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perception of *akarat* as a condition of immense suffering, incommensurate with the matriarchs' piety and righteousness. Simply put, *akarat* defies the biblical logic of reward and punishment. In response, the rabbis posit a variety of explanations. By far, the most pervasive explanation centers on prayer. *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* (2:14) records the following:

R. Levi in the name of R. Shila from Kfar Temarta and R. Helbo in the name of R. Johanan said: Why were the matriarchs so long barren? Because the Holy One, blessed be He, longed to hear their prayer. He said to them: 'My dove, I will tell you why I have kept you childless; because I was longing to hear your prayer.' Hence it says, 'For sweet is thy voice and thy countenance is comely.'

Couched in the language of love and eroticism, the *midrash* justifies the predicament of barrenness as a reflection of God's deep longing for the prayers of *akarat*. The voice of an *akarah* is compared to the voice of the beloved in the Song of Songs; her prayer is sweet and loving, as it were, to the ears of God.

“Our relationship with God should be an intimate one.”

But God's desire to hear the prayers of barren women would seem to engender further theological difficulties. How is the extreme suffering of individuals justified by God's need? The fact that the rabbis return time and again to the same question suggests that they, too, are not wholly satisfied by this response. However, their response taps into the unique qualities of a barren woman's prayer.

As we have seen, a barren woman prays from a place of despair - a prayer of tears. Her prayer is an immediate one, fueled by her sense of entitlement

to God's mercy. Like Hannah, Rebecca, and Rachel, a barren woman recognizes God as the source of blessing and she is moved to encounter God directly. As a *midrash* in *Devarim Rabbah* (7:6) states: "God holds three keys in His hands over which no creature, not even angel or Seraph, has any control. They are as follows: the key of resurrection, the key of the barren woman, and the key of rain." The barren women understand very well that God holds the keys to their fertility, a gift that many women take for granted.

And the prayers of *akarat* are powerful. Modeled on the intense prayer of Rebecca and Isaac, the rabbis compare the *tefillot* of barren women to a pitchfork, capable of overturning divine decrees. Their *tefillot* literally affect the opening of closed spaces, while creating lots of new room in their

relationship with God.

On *Rosh Hashanah*, we are asked to adopt the mindset of an *akarah*. More specifically, we are challenged to model our prayer stance and our attitude towards God on that of an *akarah*. Like the *akarat*, our relationship with God should be an intimate one: bolstered by a sense of entitlement, humbled by a sense of dependency. We rely on God for even the most "natural" gifts: food, rain, health, and life. God holds the keys to our fate. Sincere and conscious prayer is the legacy of our matriarchs whom we aspire to emulate on *Rosh Hashanah*. ■

Tammy Jacobowitz is completing coursework towards a PhD in Midrash at the University of Pennsylvania. A graduate of the Talmud-Tanach program at Drisha, she teaches adult education classes in Bible and Midrash in New York and Philadelphia.



Zionist New Year's Greetings
Williamsburg Post Card Co., New York.
Courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary

To Satisfy Her Spirit: Women and *Shofar* By Rahel Berkovits

Every *Rosh Hashanah* families organize babysitting schedules, synagogues announce the times of *shofar* blowing and arrange an additional full set of *tekiyot* at the end of services, and the *shofar* is blown in hospitals for female patients. All these practices are done to ensure women's participation in the central *mitzvah* of the holiday, even though *halakhically* women are not obligated in the commandment of *shofar*. These communal customs reflect the *halakhic* system's concern with women's religious development and the legal power of women's performance of non-obligatory *mitzvot*. Both biblical and rabbinic prohibitions are set aside in order to satisfy women's spiritual needs.

The *baraita* in *Kiddushin* 33b lists *shofar* as a positive time-dependent commandment from which women are exempt. Although women today take for granted that they may perform time-dependent *mitzvot*, this is not *halakhically* self-evident. The discussion in *Rosh Hashanah* 33a, on the subject of *shofar*, addresses this general question by connecting the argument that arises in the case of *shofar* to an earlier dispute concerning women's participation in the act of *semikha*¹—the “laying of hands” on a sacrifice in the Temple to achieve atonement.

[Mishna:] We do not prevent children from blowing.² [Gemara:] This implies we prevent women. But has it not been taught: We do not prevent either women or children from blowing on *yom tov*. Abaye said: It is not a difficulty. One view is R. Yehuda's, the other is that of R. Yose and R. Shimon. Since it is taught: ‘Speak to the sons of Israel’ (Leviticus 1) — sons of Israel lay hands, daughters of Israel do not lay hands, these are the words of R. Yehuda. R. Yose and R. Shimon say women may perform the laying of hands on a voluntary basis.

This Gemara brings a *tannaitic*³ dispute as to whether one must prevent women from blowing the *shofar*. *Rashi* explains the logic of preventing

women from blowing in the light of a general problem with women's performance of non-obligatory *mitzvot*, that of *ba'al tosif* — the prohibition of adding to the commandments. The Torah explicitly states⁴ that one may not add to or detract from God's commands. If God did not obligate women in positive time-dependent *mitzvot*, then women performing them, with the intent of doing a *mitzvah*, might be violating this biblical prohibition. Even if women may perform non-obligatory *mitzvot* other problems arise⁵, specifically in the case of *shofar*. For example, the Rabbis prohibited playing a musical instrument on *yom tov*. If a woman's blowing is not a commanded action then it might be comparable to playing

an instrument and therefore be prohibited. If so, may a man who has already fulfilled his obligation blow again for women? Does the *halakhic* principle of *areivu*⁶, repeating a *mitzvah* that you have already fulfilled on behalf of another, apply to helping others perform *mitzvot* from which they are exempt, especially in this case where just playing is rabbinically prohibited? May the *shofar* be carried, a biblical prohibition, for the benefit of women who do not *halakhically* need it for the practices of the day?

All *halakhic* authorities agree that women may voluntarily perform *mitzvot* from which they are exempt. The source of this practice stems from the opinion of R. Yose and R. Shimon



Rabbi Haskel Lookstein
showing Erica Newman-Corre
how to blow shofar

quoted in the *baraita* above, which permitted women who were bringing sacrifices to perform *semikha*. The reason for their position is made clear in the fuller text of the *baraita* in *Hagigah* 16b.

R. Yose and R. Shimon say: The daughters of Israel may perform the laying of hands on a voluntary basis. Said R. Yose, Abba Eleazar told me: Once we had a calf designated as a peace-sacrifice, and we brought it to the Women's Court and the women performed laying of hands on it. Not that the women were obligated to do so, but in order to give them *nachat ruach* — spiritual satisfaction.⁷

In this text, R. Yose and R. Shimon derive the *halakha* from a specific precedent in Temple times. Once a woman wanted⁸ to perform the ceremony of *semikha*, on her own sacrifice. It is normally biblically prohibited to use things that already have been dedicated to the Temple and so belong to God for other purposes.⁹ In this case, however, the rabbis brought the calf out from the area of sacrifice so that the women could perform the ritual. The text explicitly states that this ritual act was permitted not because there was any obligation for the women to perform it, but rather to bring them spiritual satisfaction. Denying them the right to participate in this ritual seemingly would have upset or pained them. The concern of the rabbis was to allow the women to express themselves religiously despite the *halakhic* obstacles. As with *shofar* above, this proof text is quoted in every place that the Gemara discusses women's observance of non-obligatory *mitzvot*.

This consideration for women's spir-

itual feelings that is derived from the case of *semikha* becomes the meta-*halakhic* principle underlying all further discussion of women's observance of non-obligatory commandments. The *Ran* (14th century, Spain) explains in Tractate *Rosh Hashanah*¹⁰ that based on the precedent of *semikha*, "if women want to fulfill all positive time-dependent commandments, they may and we do not worry about *ba'al tosif* or about a prohibited blowing." The power of the principle of *nachat ruach* to affect practical *halakha* is clearly articulated in the later code *Shulkhan Aurukh Harav*¹¹, written by Shneur Zalman of Liady at the end of the eighteenth century.

אע"פ שהנשים פטורות מ"מ אם רצו לתקוע בעצמן הרשות בידן ואע"פ שהתקיעה ב"ט בחנם אסורה מדברי סופרים מ"מ כדי לעשות נחת רוח לנשים התירו להן איסור קל כזה.

Even though women are exempt, nevertheless if they want to blow for themselves they are allowed to; even though just blowing on *yom tov* is rabbinically prohibited, nevertheless so as to bring spiritual satisfaction to women they are permitted this minor infraction of the law.

Not only may women blow *shofar* for themselves, overriding existing prohibitions, but men are also allowed to override certain prohibitions in order to facilitate a woman hearing *shofar*. The *Rosh*¹² (14th century, Ashkenaz) argues against the *Ba'al ha'Ittur* (12th century, Provence and Spain), who thinks that women may only blow for themselves, and that men who have already blown cannot blow for them.¹³

The *Rosh* quotes the *Ravyah* (12th century, Ashkenaz), who disagrees with this view, and states that just as in the case of women performing *semikha* which had *halakhic* problems and yet was permissible, so too it is permissible for someone who has already fulfilled his obligation to blow *shofar* for women. The *Ravyah* continues by saying that it is even permissible to carry the *shofar* to blow for women, since women's intention is to do *mitzvot* and this aids in educating women to perform optional *mitzvot*. For the *Ravyah* enabling and educating women to perform *mitzvot* overrides all the relevant *halakhic* obstacles.

Carrying the *shofar* on *Rosh Hashanah* to facilitate women's performance of the *mitzvah* is disputed amongst later authorities. *Halakhically* it is only permissible to carry an object that is needed to fulfill the rituals of the holiday. In a lengthy discussion, the *Sha'agat Aryeh*¹⁴ (18th century, Lithuania, then Germany) states emphatically that for *nachat ruach* one can only override a rabbinic prohibition, but not a biblical one, such as carrying. In his view the desire of women to hear the *shofar* does not constitute a need of the day because of the lack of obligation. Rav Moshe Feinstein¹⁵ sharply attacks the *Sha'agat Aryeh's* position and notes that the custom in all places is to carry for women even where there is no *eruv*.¹⁶ In his responsum, R. Feinstein articulates how he conceptualizes women's observance of optional *mitzvot*. "Even for women there is a great need, since they are fulfilling a *mitzvah* and they receive reward." He asserts that one cannot evaluate *halakhic* need solely based on whether the act is obligatory or not.

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HONEY RACKMAN ז"ל

JOFA mourns the recent death of Honey Rackman, our beloved founding Board member. Honey was a warm, loving and kind person, with a great wit and sense of humor. A tireless activist on behalf of *agunot* for three decades, she worked not only to alleviate the suffering of hundreds of individual *agunot*, but also to find global *halakhic* solutions that would eliminate the problem forever. She was an active member of Agunah International Inc, and was co-founder of GET. Despite serious illness in her last years, she continued this work with zeal and passion, traveling widely and speaking publicly. Honey was also an active member of the Flatbush Women's Tefillah Group. She helped plan JOFA's First and Second International Conferences on Feminism and Orthodoxy, and was a plenary speaker at both.

The Jewish world has suffered a great loss. יהי זכרה ברוך

“Perhaps Next Year...”

By Esther Hidary

I consider myself a feminist. My husband does not. The first weekend we were married my husband, after making a beautiful *kiddush*, turned to me and asked me to make *hamotzi*. I laughed and waved him off feeling suddenly awkward and uncomfortable. Four years have passed since then and little has changed. I am an educator and a reader. I make a point of promoting women's causes both inside and out of the classroom. I even consider myself well versed on a variety of religious subjects. Yet, when it comes to engaging in male-dominated religious rituals, my confidence suddenly dissipates and I find myself left with nothing more than a profound reluctance. While there can be no simple answer to this question, I cannot help but ask if this hesitancy is a manifestation of my Sephardic Jewish identity. I wonder, as I often do, if being a Syrian feminist is by definition difficult.

An initial response to this query yields an emphatic yes. Growing up in the center of Brooklyn's close-knit Syrian/Sephardic community, I was always aware of, and disturbed by, the none-too-invisible line dividing the sexes. Even in the most liberal synagogues, women's voices were rarely heard and their inclusion in the services were quaint concessions at best. The fact that most of the community's women had never attended yeshiva and had little knowledge of Hebrew language and *halakha* made these distinctions inevitable. Today, however, much has changed. Almost all the young women in the community attend schools where they are taught as much about Judaism as their male counterparts. The time for change is therefore at hand. Why then is it so slow in coming?

Often, closed communities are plagued by the very things that make them strong. The lifeblood of the Syrian community, which many marvel at for its low assimilation rate and continued growth and prosperity, is its fervent attachment to tradition. In the minds of many, the ways of our fathers are to be sanctified and treasured rather than disregarded or altered. As the community's children grow older, therefore, they tend to return to, rather than fly away from, the nest. In a similar vein, the Conservative and Reform movements, as well as the feminist movements with which they are often mistakenly aligned, are viewed with ill-concealed disdain. Many in the community feel that what lies at the heart of these movements is a disrespectful and potentially dangerous distancing from time-honored traditions.

Unfortunately, such attitudes have been exacerbated in recent years by the rising tide of ultra-orthodoxy within the community. While traditional Sephardic Judaism has the spirit of progressive Maimonidean thinking at its core, of late this has been replaced by a more fear-driven and reactionary attitude toward cultural and religious innovation. The topic on the lips of many in the community is modesty. In such an atmosphere the drive to create a space where women can be seen and heard has been roundly condemned. A woman in the community who may sincerely wish to express herself spiritually and ritually is therefore placed in the difficult position of having even her most private and personal engagements with Judaism become the subjects of communal criticism.

Such politicizing of religious engagements makes my reaction to my husband's request more understandable. In making *hamotzi* I would also be making a statement about myself, my community, my religious philosophies, and my political agendas. The burden of all this would taint my ability to sincerely connect with the experience. While all Modern Orthodox women seeking to make a space for themselves must carry similar burdens, the Sephardic woman is perhaps unique in that she carries an awareness of her communal connections with her at all times. She feels no desire to change the status quo, because she recognizes the importance of maintaining the integrity of the community's structures. The line between



Welcoming Women into the Sukkah. Ushpizot Poster

Courtesy of Ma'yan: The Jewish Women's Project

There is a long established tradition to invite seven Biblical patriarchs into the *sukkah* as guests (*ushpizin*) on *Succot*. Recently families have added the custom of welcoming female figures from the wealth of our past. Ma'yan suggests inviting the seven prophetesses—Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Hulda, and Esther as *ushpizot*, drawing on the mystical connection between the seven prophetesses (listed in *Megillah* 14a-b) and the seven *sefirot* in *Kabbalah*. Other families incorporate into the ritual other Biblical women, Talmudic figures such as Bruria and Yalta, or later figures such as Dulcie of Worms, Dona Gracia Mendes, Gluckl of Hamlin, and Rachel Morpurgo.

private and public religious engagement is indistinct for her and therefore constantly in flux.

Members of the community seeking to balance the scales for women therefore face a difficult task. They must find a way to help the community grow without forcing it to change. Unfortunately the centers of growth – local schools and synagogues – are led either by ultra-orthodox factions or by men who lack the motivation to truly assist in promoting women's causes. However, many women have begun taking matters into their own hands. Small groups of women in some synagogues have requested their own prayer groups. Many women have begun attending classes at Drisha and some young women have been spending a year in Israel. *Bat Mitzvahs* have become more commonplace and many women are working at a fevered pitch in the areas that have historically been their domain. Bake sales abound, *chesed* projects and organizations gain more momentum each year and women's learning groups and *Tehillim* gatherings are commonplace. These activities indicate that many women in the community are anxious to find spiritual fulfillment in whatever way they can.

Growth is a difficult process. Every *Rosh Hashanah* we re-confront our flawed and fractured selves and contemplate the ways we will mend our futures. Very quickly though we learn that meaningful developments, on both personal and communal levels, are slow in coming and often involve stretching our thoughts and perceptions in uncomfortable, if not painful, directions. Looking around at my complex community, I note the dynamic women who have taken the first steps toward establishing a more consciously egalitarian Sephardic community. Perhaps my own small acts will in and of themselves help to move the community forward. Perhaps this year I should make *hamotzi* with a clear conscience. ■

Esther Hidary was born and raised in Brooklyn's Sephardic community where she currently teaches high school English. She holds a masters in Education from Columbia's Teacher's College and is currently completing a masters in English at NYU.

New Beginnings

At this season of new beginnings, we thought it fitting to share the text of a beautiful prayer for a mother to recite on the occasion of the birth of her child. This can easily be incorporated into the *brit* or *simchat bat* ceremony welcoming the new baby. It is reprinted with permission of the authors of the prayer, Shelley List and Yael Penkower. For reasons of space we are not printing the entire text which is available on our website www.jofa.org.

* * * * *

תפילה לילודת

ה', בורא עולם, עושה מעשה בראשית, שתפתני עמך בבריאת חיים שילדתי ביום גדול ונורא זה. לבי מלא שמחה, תן לאישי ולמשפחתי לעמוד לידי ולהלל את רחמך. כי לא עזבתני בצעקי ולא שכחתי בכאבי צירי, אבל מכאבים אלו חוללת שמחה גדולה. ואת בכיי כיסית [בבכיה של הרכה הנולדת הבאה/בבכוי של הרך הנולד הבא] לעולם.

יהי רצון מלפניך ה' אלוקי ואלוקי האמהות שתשמור על חיי [הילדה הזאת/הילד הזה] מכל מחלה ותאונה ותקים את [נפשה/נפשו]. ואותי, [אמה/אמו], רפא וחזק [למענה/למענו]. [כי הילדה הזאת בוטחת בך להחיותה ולשמרה/כי הילד הזה בוטח בך להחיותו ולשמרו] כשם שאני בוטחת בך להחיותני ולשמרני. עזור לי לעמוד על המשמר למען [בתי/בני]. מלאני בסבלנות, בצדק וביושר [כלפיה/כלפיו]. תן לי את היכולת לתת [לה בגדלה/לו בגדלו] מזון, אהבה ודברי תורתך, ויהיו פחדי כעשן בלי אש, כענן בלי גשם ופזרם ברוח אהבתך.

* * * * *

Master of creation: You have made me Your partner in creating a new life on this great and wonderful day. My heart is filled with joy! Let my husband and family stand with me and praise Your mercy, For You did not desert me in my wailing, nor forget me in my labor, but You fashioned from this pain a great joy and covered my cries with the birth cries of a tender infant.

May it be Your will, my God and God of the foremothers, to guard the life of this girl/boy from sickness and accident, and to sustain her/him. Heal me, her/his mother, and give me strength for her/his sake. Since this girl/boy trusts me to nurture and protect her/him, I must trust in You to nurture and protect me.

Help me to be diligent for the sake of my child. Fill me with patience and fairness, and let me act correctly towards her/him. Let me nourish her/him with food, with love and with the words of Your Torah. And may all my fears be like smoke without fire, like clouds with no rain, which scatter before Your loving spirit.

A Report from Jerusalem: The Kolech Conference By Idana Goldberg

Thirteen hundred women (and some men) took time from their busy schedules of work and family to exercise their minds and hearts at Kolech's third international conference: "To Be a Jewish Woman." Held at Jerusalem's *Binyanei Ha'ooma* on July 1 and 2, the conference addressed a wide range of issues, including; the impact of feminism on *halakhic* change, confronting and preventing sexual abuse in the Orthodox community, and differences between the approaches of Orthodox women in Israel and the United States.

Kolech, the Religious Women's Forum, was organized in Israel in 1998 to advance the status of observant women in religious and communal life. Setting the tone for this year's conference, Kolech President Chana Kehat opened by quoting Jeremiah (31:16) where God asks Rachel to cease her voice from crying. Ms. Kehat assured the audience that the voices of Orthodox women today are not crying, but rather are the voices of optimism, prophecy and clarity.

Optimism certainly characterized the mood of the participants, though there was also lingering frustration at the pace of change and the intransigence of community leaders. The energy of the participants was palpable as women lingered in the hallways to discuss what they had heard. Intellectually challenging sessions forced participants to grapple with the effects of contemporary family structures on *halakhic* decision

making; attempts to create gender sensitive Jewish education for boys; or images of God in feminist *midrashim*. Reflecting the diversity of Israeli society, panels addressed religious expression among Ethiopian women; religious Mizrahi feminism; the spiritual world of Yemenite women, and even feminism in Shas (the ultra-Orthodox Religious Party). The tragic situation of *agunot* was discussed from multiple angles: historical perspectives, prevention through pre-nuptial agreements, and potential *halakhic* solutions. One highlight of the conference was a screening of the film "Tehora" and a discussion afterwards with the director that raised provocative and powerful questions about the laws of *taharat hamishpacha* (family purity) and women's observance of them. (JOFA will be screening this film followed by a panel discussion at the Manhattan JCC on November 6.)

A crucial area where Kolech has emerged as a leader in Israeli society is as an advocate for women who charge men with sexual abuse and harassment. Conference sessions reflected Kolech's commitment to breaking the silence on sexual abuse within the Orthodox community. The final plenary, titled, "A Sacred People: the Price We Pay for the Myth," revealed some disturbing instances of sexual violence, including Judy Klitsner's account of her experience with Baruch Lanner, the charismatic NCSY leader who has been charged with abusing young

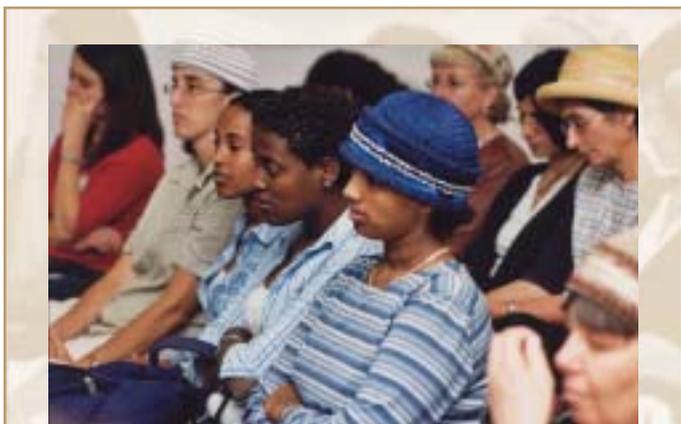
women and men for decades. One brave young woman shared the consequences of her rape by an intruder at her seminary. In a misguided attempt to protect her and her marriageability, her teachers claimed she had only been attacked, and not raped. The young woman began to heal only when she was able to break out of this culture of

shame, speak the truth and come to terms with what had happened to her. Judge Tchia Shapira catalogued the sins of Orthodox men who violently and sexually abused women and the inexcusable behavior of the Orthodox communities that threatened and ostracized the victims. Kolech's work sends the message that it is only by acknowledging the problem and creating safe spaces for victims to tell their stories that the Orthodox community can begin to prevent sexual abuse.

Plenary addresses raised issues that confront religious women in both Israel and United States. The first morning Rabbis Daniel Sperber and Yehudah Eisenberg and Ms. Rachel Keren considered the pace and implications of *halakhic* change. They demonstrated the parameters within which *halakha* has responded to new social realities and scientific findings and considered the conditions that must be met for change to be considered legitimate. On the second morning, the panelists considered *tzniut* (modesty) and its pervasiveness as a regulator of women's behavior. Repeating the plenary address she delivered at last November's JOFA Conference (though this time in Hebrew), Dr. Tova Hartman Halbertal decried the emphasis contemporary discussions of *tzniut* place on women's bodies and the distorted sense of self that *tzniut* gives young women. Rabbi Ronen Lubitch concluded that while the laws of personal *tzniut* should not be thrown away simply because they were written by men, they should also not be followed obsessively. At the same time, he argued, communal standards of *tzniut*, specifically those concerning women's participation in Jewish public life, need to reflect respect for women and women's equality in *avodat Hashem* (service of God).

Kolech organizers invited JOFA to participate in a dialogue about the differences between Orthodox feminism in the United States and in Israel. Specifically, they posed the question: Why is it that many Israeli women believe that American Orthodox women have made greater progress

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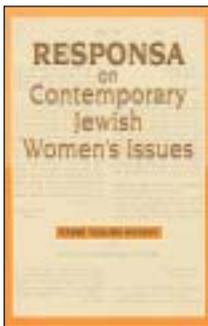
Participants at the Kolech Conference

BookCorner

Responsa on Contemporary Jewish Women's Issues

By Rabbi Yehuda Henkin

KTAV Publishing House 2003 \$22.95



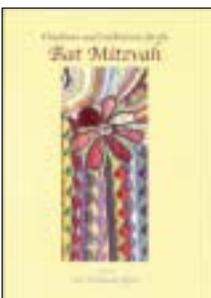
Readers who know of Rabbi Henkin from his book in English "Equality Lost: Essays in Torah Commentary, Halacha, and Jewish Thought" will be grateful for this opportunity to have translations of twenty-four of his responsa on women's issues. Based on his *Responsa B'nei Banim* published in Hebrew in three volumes, the issues cover a wide range of topics vital to Orthodox feminists including women's *zimmun*, women's *Megillah* readings and prayer groups, *mechitzah*, women and *tallit*, *tzniut*, and birth control. Rabbi Henkin, an American born scholar living in Israel, is cognizant of the changing role and place of women in contemporary life. He is also aware of the historical contexts of many of early *halakhic* precedents, but has great respect for the integrity of *halakha* and of *halakhic* tradition, and of the importance of custom. As a *posek* (religious decisor), he is neither always lenient or always stringent, whether dealing with general issues or with women's issues. He is thoughtful and sensitive, writes with great knowledge and authority, and one can learn a lot about the process of *halakhic* decision-making by studying these responsa. He is wary of quick solutions to problems, and is concerned about the public effects of decisions. Where he is convinced by the sources and the situation, he speaks out. Though the introduction notes that the responsa are presented for a general readership, the arguments are dense and citations are numerous. It is not an easy book to read but it is essential reading for everybody interested in *halakhic* issues concerning women. This is an excellent book for study groups.

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Traditions and Celebrations for the Bat Mitzvah

Edited by Ora Wiskind Elper

Urim Publications, Jerusalem, 2003 \$24



Because there is no fixed ritual for celebrating a *Bat Mitzvah*, there is room for creativity on the part of every celebrant and her family. But sometimes families want some help in crafting ceremonies and celebrations. This volume will be of great assistance to them and will act to inspire and stimulate the development of personal and meaningful Orthodox *Bat Mitzvah* celebrations.

The collection of essays was originally published in Hebrew in 2003, under the auspices of MaTaN Women's Institute for

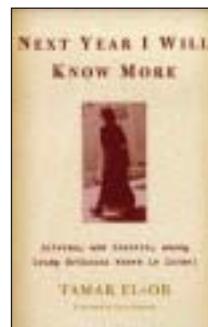
Torah Study in Jerusalem; some pieces were added for the English version. The first part deals with *halakhic* aspects of the celebration; the second contains essays exploring a variety of sources that can be studied with *Bat Mitzvah* girls and the third part offers practical suggestions and guidelines to achieve "meaningful preparation through active participation." This last section includes a piece by Ilana Fodiman, "Reflections of a *Bat Mitzvah* Tutor," that was previously published in the JOFA booklet "The Orthodox Jewish Woman and Ritual: Options and Opportunities-Bat Mitzvah". This anthology from MaTaN brings together a wide-ranging variety of approaches, a treasure-trove of sources and many thoughtful reflections on the topic. Reading it will enrich the experience of preparing for this important event in the lives of girls and their families. ■

Next Year I Will Know More

Literacy and Identity among Young Orthodox Women in Israel

By Tamar El-Or

Wayne State University Press, 2002 \$39.95



Probably the greatest change affecting Orthodox women today is the range of Jewish educational opportunities open to them. This book is a remarkable exploration of the world of young Israeli women in academic programs of intensive Jewish studies. The author of "Educated and Ignorant: Ultra Orthodox Women and Their World", Tamar El-Or is an anthropologist who teaches at the Hebrew University. She focuses on the experiences of young women studying at the *midrasha* (seminary) at Bar-Ilan University, but the book includes material relating to other institutions such as Midreshet Lindenbaum, MaTaN, Nishmat, Kibbutz Ein Hanatziv and Migdal Oz. The writer explores the learning experiences of these young women through her observation of classes and through conversations with them and their instructors. She asks why these women choose to study Jewish texts and the consequences for them as individuals and for Israeli society in general. El-Or emphasizes that she is a secular scholar and researcher looking at the process from the outside but she has penetrated deep into the world of the *midrasha* and the long extracts of interviews with individual young women give us fascinating insights into their opinions and feelings. She concludes that the "spreading practice of intensive Jewish studies among women in the religious Zionist community in Israel is a revolutionary phenomenon that will, in a short time, bring about a profound transformation in Orthodox Judaism."

...continued on page 10

Kolech Conference

...continued from page 8

while American women look to Israel as the model for creative and successful programming? The session focused on some of the challenges Orthodox women face in each country from community leaders, rabbis, educators and Jewish women themselves as they seek to promote opportunities for women's educational, religious and spiritual growth within the *halakhic* framework. The panelists considered that the most central difference between the countries is the forum in which Orthodox feminism has made the most progress. In America, Orthodox feminist action

has emerged from the *beit kneset* (synagogue) and concentrated on increasing women's role in public prayer and life-cycle rituals. In Israel, Orthodox women have had the most success in the *beit midrash* (house of study), and have made less progress in improving synagogue architecture, assuming communal leadership positions or in advocating for greater inclusion in ritual. This difference was also reflected in the session topics at the conference; there were no sessions that dealt with the position of women in the synagogue. Another difference related to *agunot*. Because of the structure of the rabbinical courts in Israel, the inclusion of women as rabbinical advocates has resulted in measurable change for many

Israeli women seeking divorces. In America, the rabbinical courts have no place for any advocates, male or female, so a woman appearing before a *beit din* has no support. As the session showed, the relationship between Israeli and American Orthodox women committed to change is symbiotic – we must each learn from and emulate the successes of the other.

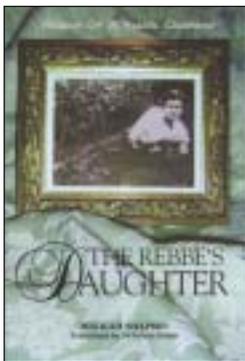
For more information on Kolech see their website www.kolech.org. ■

Idana Goldberg is completing her doctorate in Modern Jewish history and Gender history at the University of Pennsylvania. She is a member of the JOFA board. She lives in Manhattan with her husband Michael Kellman and daughter Noam.

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The Rebbe's Daughter: Memoir of a Hasidic Childhood

By Malkah Shapiro, translated from the Hebrew, edited and with an introduction and commentary by Nehemia Polen
Jewish Publication Society 2002, \$30.00



This memoir, which was a winner of the 2002 National Jewish Book Award, focuses on the life of the writer before her marriage at the age of 14. The peaceful and holy atmosphere of Hasidic life is evoked in her portrait of her childhood as the daughter of a Hasidic *Rebbe* in Poland. Much of the memoir is set around 1904-5, when she was turning 12. The book is particularly interesting for its portraits of the writer's mother

and grandmother who oversee the administration of the household. It is fascinating that the *Rebbe*, who was interested in science, and knew Arabic, encourages the intellectual and spiritual development of his daughters as well as his sons. The girls are taught at home by tutors in *Tanach* and other Jewish texts, and in secular subjects like German, Russian and history. Shapiro describes the women in the *Rebbe's* synagogue on *Shabbat Shirah* (actually in the dining room because visiting *Hasidim* were using the *ezrat nashim*) standing up in a spirit of exaltation when the verse about Miriam singing at the Red Sea was chanted and joining in joyfully. Nehemia Polen provides the reader with fascinating and helpful footnotes; with important information on the writer's families; with genealogies and even a map of the Hasidic court; as well as with biographical information on the writer who emigrated to the Land of Israel in 1926, where she lived until her death in 1971.

Call for Volunteers!

Volunteers needed to assist at
**JOFA's Fifth International Conference
on Feminism & Orthodoxy**

Sunday and Monday, February 15-16, 2004
(Presidents' Day Weekend).

Please contact JOFA office:
1-888-550-JOFA or jofa@rcn.com

JOFA Film Festival at the JCC

Thursday, November 6, 2003, 8:00 pm

"Tehora" (Purity)

Anat Zuria, Director

Breaking the Code of Silence:

Exploring Sexuality in The Jewish Community

Israeli filmmaker, Anat Zuria, examines the laws and rituals shaping the lives and sexuality of women who observe *taharat hamishpakha* (family purity). This film presents the struggle of religious women to adhere to *halakha* while dealing with individual needs. The screening will be followed by an open discussion with the filmmaker and other panelists.

For tickets, please call 646-505-4445.

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To Satisfy Her Spirit

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“Behold it [the woman’s act] is also a *mitzvah*...and her reward is eternal and preferable to all life in this world.” Rav Feinstein understands that a woman’s desire to perform the *mitzvah* of *shofar* constitutes a religious need that should not be evaluated based on the usual hierarchy of obligation. Rather it should be acknowledged as a pleasing act before God for which women receive divine merit. In his opinion, the need to afford women spiritual satisfaction overrides the biblical prohibition.

In conclusion, although a *mitzvah* may not be obligatory, once women choose to perform it, their act is transformed into one of significance. It becomes an act of *mitzvah* as if divinely ordained, and so has the weight to override both rabbinic and biblical prohibitions. The case of *shofar* demonstrates the extent to which religious

authorities value women’s spiritual lives. All of Israel has a responsibility to enable women’s performance of *mitzvot* in order to bring them spiritual satisfaction. ■

Rahel Berkovits received her BA in Religion from Barnard College and is now working towards a MA in Jewish Education from Hebrew University. She teaches a halakha class on Women and Mitzvot at the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem.

- 1 Vayikra, 1:2-4.
- 2 Not for the congregation but on their own.
- 3 The *Tanna'im* were the scholars from the time period of the Mishnah. A *baraita* is a *tannaitic* teaching not included in the Mishnah.
- 4 *Devarim* 4:2 and 13:1.
- 5 The question of women saying God’s name in blessings on optional *mitzvot* is discussed in this same context. See *Rabbeinu Tam’s* opinion, *Tosafot Rosh Hashanah*, 33a *Ha R. Yehuda* and *Hagigah* 16b *la’asot nachat ruach l’nashim* and the *Rashba* in *Rosh Hashanah* who explains why women can say *vetzivanu* (He (God) commanded us). *Rambam* maintains that women may not say blessings, *Mishneh Torah*, *Laws of tzitzit* 3:9.
- 6 All of Israel is responsible/are guarantors for one and other. For further discussion of

- women and *areivut* see *Rosh*, *Berakhot* 20b, Rabbi Akiva Eger, *Tosefet Mishnah Megillah* 2:4 and *Arukh HaShulkhan Shabbat* 267:6.
- 7 I realize that one could translate the phrase in a more negative way as “placate” or “gratify”. I hope, however, that the *halakhic* ramifications of this phrase, which will be explained in the continuation of this article, will justify my translation.
 - 8 The desire of Jewish women to participate in ritual is not just a consequence of the contemporary feminist movement.
 - 9 Different early authorities discuss whether she actually touched the animal, which would be a biblical prohibition, or just held her hands above the animal, which would be a rabbinic prohibition.
 - 10 9b in the pages of the *Rif*.
 - 11 *Laws of Rosh Hashanah* 589:2.
 - 12 *Rosh Hashanah siman* 7.
 - 13 The *Ba’al ha’Ittur* cites the custom in *Ashkenaz* of a man blowing for a woman who had given birth before blowing in synagogue so that he could fulfill his own *mitzvah* at the same time, thus legally justifying his act.
 - 14 *Respona* #106.
 - 15 *Iggrot Moshe, Orah Hayyim* 3:94.
 - 16 An *eruv* is a symbolic mixing of private and public domains to permit carrying.

The issues of this year's JOFA Journal are made possible through the generosity of Zelda Stern and the Harry Stern Family Foundation.



Young Girls in Prayer,
Williamsburg Post
Card Co., New York c.1915.

Courtesy of the Library of the
Jewish Theological Seminary

JOFA’s Fifth International Conference on Feminism & Orthodoxy

Grand Hyatt Hotel,
New York City
President’s Day weekend,
February 15-16, 2004

Entitled “*Zachar u-Neqevah Bara Otam: Women and Men in Partnership*,” the conference aims to explore the roles that Jewish ritual, *halakha*, and culture play in relationships and interactions between women and men, paying particular attention to the implications of changing gender roles in Jewish families, institutions, synagogues and schools.

Mission Statement of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance

The Alliance's mission is to expand the spiritual, ritual, intellectual, and political opportunities for women within the framework of *halakha*. We advocate meaningful participation and equality for women in family life, synagogues, houses of learning, and Jewish communal organizations to the full extent possible within *halakha*. Our commitment is rooted in the belief that fulfilling this mission will enrich and uplift individual and communal life for all Jews.

Yes! I want to support JOFA's work in expanding the spiritual, ritual, intellectual and political opportunities for Orthodox women within the framework of *halakha*.

Enclosed is my gift of: \$1,000 \$500 \$100 \$50 Other \$_____

\$360 or more includes Life Membership \$36 or more includes Annual Membership

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