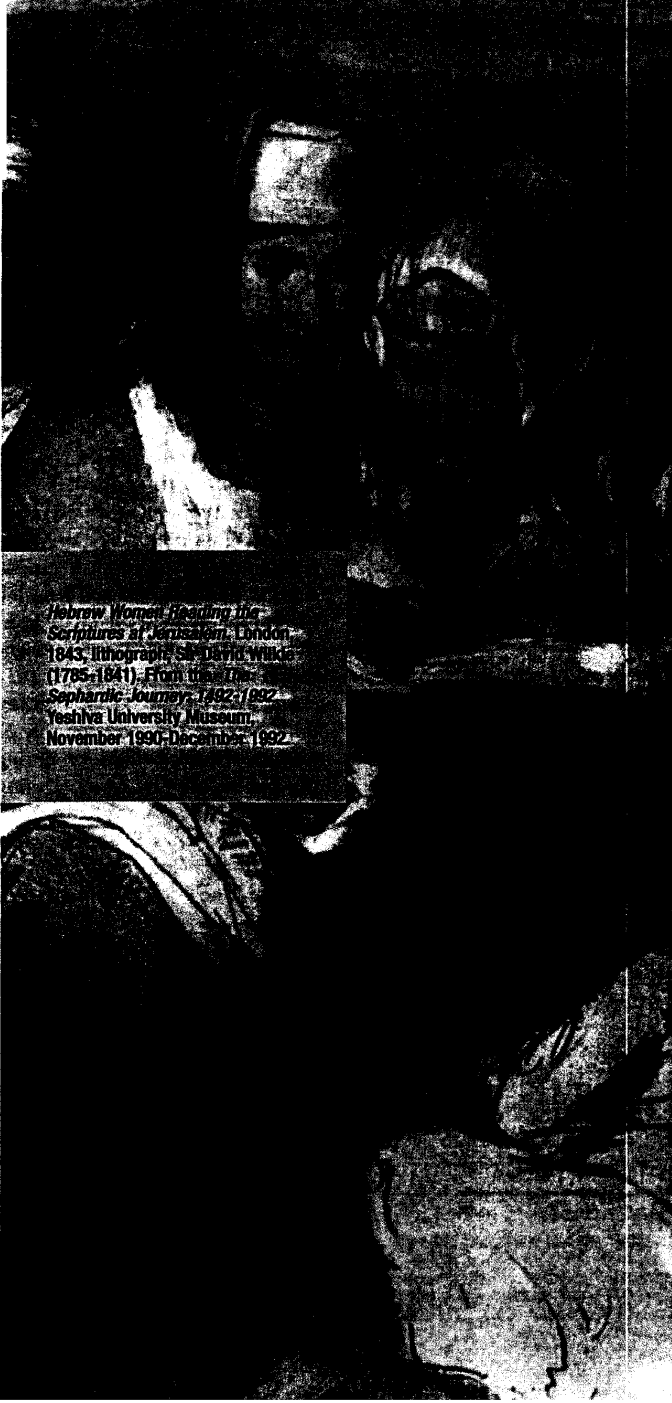


# Expanding Women's Roles in Orthodoxy: The History Behind the Movement.



*Hebrew Women Reading the Scriptures of Jerusalem, London 1843, lithograph by David Wilder (1785-1841). From the book *Sephardic Journeys, 1892-1892*, Yeshiva University Museum, November 1990-December 1992.*

**T**oenet *Rabbanit* (Rabbinic Advocate). *Yoetzet Halachah* (Halachic Advisor). *Madricha Ruchanit* (Spiritual Counselor). These titles are part of the new nomenclature of Orthodoxy, and they reflect a sea of change in Orthodoxy's acceptance of women in traditional Jewish learning and leadership roles.

KOLECH. JOFA. L'maan B'nos Yisrael International. These organizations have become a familiar presence in Orthodox institutional life. Despite the differences among them—only one identifies itself as feminist—they have made a marked impact on the agenda of early 21st century Orthodox Jewry, particularly issues involving women. This is evident in the various organizations' biennial conferences which, in the cases of KOLECH and JOFA, attract more than 2000 participants, both in Israel and the United States.

Drisha. Ma'ayan. MaTAN. Nishmat. These *beit-midrash* (study halls), based programs in North America and Israel are now recognized and acclaimed for their contribution to the expanding Jewish religious life of Orthodox women.

Yes, the movement for women's

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involvement and participation within the boundaries of *halachah*, Jewish law, has come of age, and with it, a new group of learned women, both willing and able to take their place alongside men on the pulpit or in the *beit-midrash*. In fact, a revolution has taken place as women now participate in organized Orthodox Jewish life and institutions in an unprecedented manner. For example, in New York, at the Hebrew Institute at Riverdale and in Maryland at the Kemp Mill Synagogue, women give *drashot*, sermons, sometimes during the service and sometimes after. In the synagogue, in learning and scholarship, in Jewish ritual, and in halachic discourse (particularly relating to gender issues), women are now playing active roles in the developing Orthodox agenda—often with rabbinic approval.

What precipitated this change? Is the development of an Orthodox women's rights movement a by-product of the trend toward egalitarianism in Judaism's other branches? Is it an outgrowth of the secular American feminist movement? Or, is it reflective of the multifaceted character of modern orthodoxy and its coming of age?

The acceptance of the expanding roles of women in Orthodoxy is ultimately limited by the boundaries of *halachah*.

Before addressing these questions, one must place these changes in an historical context. Jewish history abounds with examples of women who cast off conventional expectations and played active roles in traditional Jewish life. The Bible records the existence and contribution of women prophets and judges. The Talmud speaks highly of Imma Shalom and Beruria, both learned women who taught their husbands (Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Meir respectively) *halachot*. The *Babylonian Talmud* mentions midrashim concerning women who donned *tefillin* (phylacteries).

In addition, Rashi's daughters are mentioned in *Sefer Hayochasin* in connection with wearing *tefillin*. Even within medieval halachic texts, one can find isolated

instances of women who were members of the traditional community, yet moved away from the normative behavior patterns. Maimonides records in his *Mishneh Torah* that it is preferable for women to remain in the home. However, he also wrote an extensive responsa defending a woman who served as a teacher in an eleventh century Jewish school in Egypt.

The *Memoirs of Gluckel of Hameln*, a diary penned in Europe at the end of the seventeenth century by a German widow, indicates that she had knowledge of rabbinic literature. Moreover, in the nineteenth century we have numerous examples of women who were well-versed in traditional texts. Rabbi Akiva Eger of Germany, one of the greatest halachic decisors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, described in a responsa that his mother "could learn like a man" and study sacred Jewish texts.

Women throughout Jewish history also developed additional avenues of expression within the religious sphere, wherein they did not imitate or compete with their fathers and husbands. For example, the content and form of *Techinot* (prayers written by women for various life cycle events) highlight the fact that early modern women were interested in developing a uniquely feminine religious form of expression. In addition, isolated halachic works for and by women have been identified from the time of the eighteenth century Enlightenment.

And yet, there is something unique about the changing role of women within Orthodoxy during the last twenty-five years. During this period, the yearnings of a small number of women have developed into a movement. In the past, an isolated learned woman such as a Rayna Batya or Rebbetzin Kreindal could be found; now, there are structured organizations and resources that support the growing trend towards expanding the role of women in Orthodoxy.

Many factors have impacted this development. First and foremost, the influence of secular feminism has slowly crept into the Orthodox community. This process has been a slow one due to the conservative nature of Orthodoxy. The acceptance of the expanding roles of women in Orthodoxy is ultimately

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limited by the boundaries of *halachah*.

Second, the influence of other branches of Judaism upon Orthodoxy has been most strongly felt in the area of gender issues. Whereas gender issues were not the main focus of Jewish communal debate and social and intellectual interactions in the 1960s and 1970s, they came to the fore during the 1980s, particularly in the wake of the Jewish Theological Seminary's very public decision to ordain women rabbis. It took little time for Conservative synagogues to promote themselves as egalitarian, and thus threaten the liberal-minded wing of Orthodoxy. Rather than rejecting Orthodox rite, Orthodox women began to search for alternative models of religious expression (women's prayer groups, for example), that would fit into the parameters of *halachah*.

Most importantly, however, are the changes within Orthodoxy itself that precipitated the growth of Orthodox feminism. In the early 1970s, Orthodoxy gradually claimed its share of American Judaism. The American Jewish sociologist, Marshall Sklare, argued that the dominance of the Conservative movement in 1960s America was a direct result of its policy of child-centeredness, articulated best in the Conservative summer camps of the 1950s. This emphasis was adopted by the Orthodox and contributed to its growth in the 1970s and 1980s, as the Orthodox day school movement increased exponentially during the 1960s. This social change within the Jewish community resulted from what some consider the decline of the public school sys-

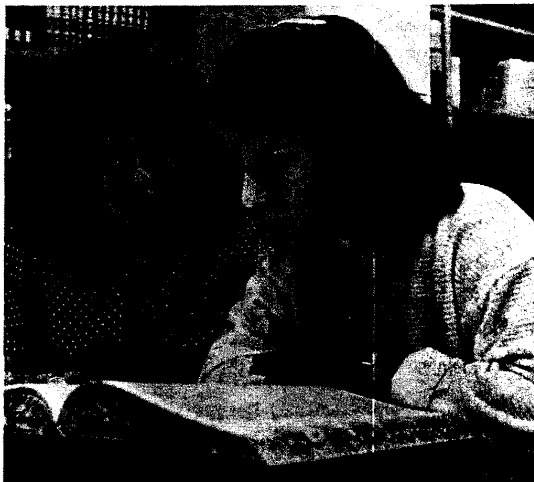
tem, the assertiveness of post WWII immigration from Europe—many of whom desired a richer Jewish education for their children, as well as increased Religious Zionist feelings following the Six Day War. From the 1970s to the 1990s Orthodoxy blossomed. As an example, consider the number of Torah institutions and study programs, kosher restaurants, products, and tours that exist today.

Because of Orthodoxy's new strength, criticism directed toward Orthodox feminism, in all its manifestations, has become more muted during the last fifteen years. The first major public debate about Orthodox feminism was initiated by a group of Yeshiva University

Jungreis is an ultra-Orthodox woman who speaks from pulpits in Orthodox synagogues, many of which are right-wing. There are many other women who are working the Orthodox speakers' circuit, including Smadar Rosensweig, Erica Brown and Shani Taragin.

Another factor that resulted in the greater acceptance of formal women's Torah study within the Orthodox community is, the historical precedence for such institutions. Sara Schmierer (1883-1938) of Cracow, a pioneer of women's torah study, was the founder of the Beit Ya'acov movement. She began teaching groups of girls, who unlike their brothers, only had a secular education and were moving away

from the traditional Jewish community. Contrary to popular belief, this Jewish educator did not approach the Hafetz Hayyim before opening her Beit Ya'acov seminary (the first modern women's Torah study seminary) in Cracow, but rather, received his approval only after the institution was already in existence. The emphasis of study was Bible, Jewish law and values. She encouraged her



Student learning with *chavruta* (study partner) at Stern College for Women.

rabbis who penned a responsa in 1984 condemning the practice of women's prayer groups. Now, almost twenty years later, dozens of these groups function around the world, sometimes with rabbinic approval. Similarly, women who were once marginalized or even ridiculed because they studied Talmud are now invited to the most prestigious American Orthodox pulpits to deliver *shiurim*. Rebbetzin

girls to go out and teach others, particularly by establishing classes for younger children. Similarly, many of the initiatives taken by Orthodox women during the last twenty-five years are only now being legitimized for their contribution to Orthodox life.

The Jewish feminist movement in the late twentieth century has elicited contradictory reactions from those interested in advancing the role of women within Orthodoxy. Some more traditionally conservative members of the movement

struggle, often ineffectively, to distance themselves from affiliates who represent the more change-oriented faction within Orthodoxy. While every Orthodox woman may not strive for the same goals—consider, for example, that at the recent Jerusalem conference of KOLECH, no *Yoetzet halakhah* agreed to give a presentation—women have benefited from the groundswell support the movement as a whole has created.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *zt"l*, recognized as the towering intellectual figure of twentieth century American Orthodoxy, served as the Dean of the Maimonides School in Boston, an institution that taught Talmud in a co-educational environment. In addition, he taught the first Talmud class at Yeshiva University's Stern College for Women. Yet, this did not mean he was a sponsor of Orthodox feminism or that he necessarily subscribed to the values that circumscribe the women's rights move-

ment. To suggest such is a disservice to his contribution to the advancement of women's role in Orthodoxy. Rabbi Soloveitchik, *zt"l*, in fact, was known to be a precedent-oriented, *halachic* thinker who combined a dedication to traditionalism with creative and innovative halachic analysis.

To be sure, there are still opponents of the Orthodox women's movement. Chana Kehat, the director of KOLECH, has argued that the resistance to change in women's status stems from both psychological and sociological factors arising from the archetype of the ideal woman—her essence, aims, and roles—as it exists in our historical tradition. Others believe that the status of women must not and cannot change, and that it is a distortion to ignore this fact. Finally, there are those who question women's motivations, arguing that their innovations are irreverent and have no place within Orthodoxy.

Nonetheless, as the movement moves into its second generation of leadership, there is an ever stronger bond between Orthodox feminists and traditional rabbis. The basis of this sociological assessment includes, the giving of Torah scrolls for women's prayer groups and speaking out on behalf of *agunot* (women who cannot obtain a legal Jewish divorce).

The future for this movement is unclear. Will the younger generation be satisfied with the accomplishments of the pioneers of Orthodox feminism? Will rabbis begin to encourage and advocate gender issues in the halachic discourse? Or will women opt for more traditional roles as a means of strengthening Jewish observance? Expanding and innovative roles for women, in the capacity of rabbinic advocates, halachic advisors and spiritual counselors, is a twenty-first century reality whose parameters remain to be defined. **A**

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