
challenge to fulfill all the parts of who we are, and who we have become, as Jewish women.

That the time has come to engage in creative halakhic discourse reexamining the way our tradition relates to those who grapple with conflicting religious priorities should come as no surprise. If we take seriously the idea that Jewish law is an organic system organizing every facet of our lives, then it would be halakhically naive to introduce legal change in one particular area without anticipating and addressing its halakhic ramifications in another.

The community must recognize that the decisions to grant women new halakhic status with regard to prayer, ritual and leadership cannot simply be implemented without giving consideration to the other religious components of women's lives and to the unique experiences as women which they will naturally bring to their new roles.

This issue is now more than ever a challenge to the Conservative movement. In the past, only those women who felt able and willing to assume equal religious status with regard to prayer were invited to do so. Recently, however, Chancellor Ismar Schorsch declared all women to be *a priori* equal to men with respect to prayer obligations. The above concerns, then, are more far reaching than ever, and demand serious and prompt consideration.

Working Toward The future

I have only begun to think about the legal traditions which could help us explore these issues. I imagine a new look at the *Havineinu*, the abridged *amidah*, or a new understanding of *tefillah b'zmanah*, praying within specific time frames. I call on those of us who are thinking about these issues to share with each other and work together to create a movement in which women can fulfill all of their halakhic obligations, old and new.

Moreover, for our discussion to have integrity, the halakhic conclusions we arrive at for women will necessarily also impact the religious lives of many men who now assume primary family roles.

Finally, as Shira Milgrom writes in her essay, all change inevitably results in some sort of loss. Indeed, though I have gained immeasurably from joining an egalitarian community, I have also lost. For example, as a young girl, during the hour after candle-lighting on Friday night, the men would go to *shul* and the women would stay home together. It was our time to talk and share with each other. It was the girls' time. It was sacred time. I miss it. Friday nights are different now that men's and women's ritual roles have merged. No less sacred, but different. I'm not sure what to make of

my loss, if anything. Perhaps my memories will at least serve as a challenge to recreate that aura within new and inclusive communities.

What does it mean to be a Jewish woman in the age of egalitarianism? As long as the "age" is in process, it means to recognize that process, to engage our tradition with the fullest understanding of ourselves as women, and to acknowledge the losses along with the rewards that result as we shape Judaism for the 21st century.

This is all I can offer now. Don't worry, though. My grandchildren will have lots more to say. □

The myth of egalitarianism

Rivkah Myers Shifren

Understanding what it means to be a Jewish woman first requires accepting that Hashem created each living creature with a definite purpose and function. The whole concept of egalitarianism contradicts this premise. Does the gazelle mourn over the fact that it is not an eagle? Does it bemoan its inability to fly, even though it is endowed with tremendous beauty and grace?

Within a Jewish context, it is oxymoronic to say that a Jewish woman is "equal" to a man. Even in their creation, man and woman were two parts of the same whole, and therefore complementary, not identical. A woman can be *different*, and was indeed created by Hashem, to fulfill a different role and function than her male counterpart--and accepting this reality, there is no true sameness, no "equality".

Cherishing Woman's Way

There is a falseness that surrounds someone's desire to be "like a man" in her quest to perform masculine duties in the Torah realm. A woman who is raised with the idea that she is perfect and whole exactly as she is, that her obligations and relationship to Hashem are valuable and important, has no need to seek out and add to her list of functions those mitzvahs that are male in nature.

She brings to her relationships with others her qualities of warmth and intelligence, modesty and kindness. Does this mean that she must be subjugated to her male

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counterpart? No! It's important to make clear distinction between cultural standards and mores, and legitimate halakhic demands. When women have been degraded and mistreated (and indeed they have), the fault lies with cultural influences, not the Torah's viewpoint. The Rambam himself exhorts Jewish husbands to *honor* their wives *more* than themselves.

The traditional Jewish woman fulfills her role in the way the Creator envisioned it. The image of the downtrodden, subservient woman, always in the shadows, silent, pregnant and in the kitchen, is an image most "egalitarian feminists" rail against. Although this may have been the "norm" for countless years, it has nothing to do with the true and heavenly purpose of the Jewish woman. The intended purpose of every Jew, whether male or female, is to draw down godliness into this world. But this is to be achieved within the framework designed by the Creator, not by an act of our own self-will.

The Way To The End Of Days

Jewish women are often criticized for having large families as though there is no higher design involved or as if this were their sole reason for existence. Nowhere in the Torah does it say that women cannot teach, practice medicine or own a business. Giving birth is certainly not the only critical role entrusted to the feminine being, but it is a role only she can manifest. While bearing and raising numerous children is often looked upon not only with distaste, but with disgust by many in secular society, the Jewish woman sees in her children an opportunity to imbue future generations with a love of Torah and God. To the Orthodox woman, each child brings its own blessings. Each child is a spark of the infinite--each Jewish *neshama* born and brought down to this earth brings us one step closer to Moshiach. There is a superb holiness in manifesting each Jewish soul into its earthly body.

A truly enlightened Jewish woman finds joy in her task of carrying out her designated mitzvot. While both men and women are obligated to perform many of the mitzvot commanded in the Torah, only men, for example are obligated to *daven* in a *minyan*, to put on *tefillin*, wear *tzitzit*, etc. This is the role designated for them in the Torah. The same way that a *Kohen* has rights to the priestly duties in the *Beis Hamikdosh*, while a Levy or Israel is barred from that particular *avoda* (service), so too, men and women have their assigned tasks. The fact that women do not have certain obligations does not make them minor players in the scheme of Jewish life. We must constantly bring the focus of each aspect of our

lives back to the spiritual source and how it relates to the Creator's intention.

Those who sincerely believe that they must take on the masculine tasks of a man in order to become closer to Hashem (e.g., pray as part of a *minyan*, put on *tzitzit*, etc.) lack an acceptance of who they are as Jewish women. *Avoda* to Hashem is fulfilled when we act on what Hashem has asked of us, not what *we* perceive Hashem wants from us, or even farther removed, what *we ourselves desire*, regardless of what Hashem has asked of us.

The Torah clearly demands that we observe mitzvot such as *kashrus*, *tefilla* (prayer), covering the hair (for married women, *taharas hamishpacha* (family purity), *mikvah*, *tznius* (modesty), etc...these are essential to Jewish womanhood. If a man were to wear a *shaitel* (wig), would it make him a better Jew? After all, the mitzvah of covering one's hair (considered an *erva*--nakedness) is certainly as vital as putting on *tefillin*. But we can see, that even though it might make an individual man "feel" closer to Hashem, *it is not required of him, and therefore its value is lessened, and in fact does not satisfy the requirement of having performed a mitzvah at all.*

When a woman breastfeeds her baby, it is something that *only she* can do. Her husband may be able to give the baby a bottle, and one can even argue that the end result is "equal", i.e., the baby is fed. However, only the mother can say that she has "nursed" her child, because that is a function that only she can perform. A man can only "mimic" her function, not fulfill it. His level of sincerity becomes irrelevant to the task.

A friend related that she attended a social/religious event, where one of the women present was wearing a *kippah*, however, the woman's husband's head was bare. The irony of the situation is evident. Each felt compelled to make a statement, but was it made to serve the will of Hashem or to be self-serving?

We must always be cognizant of our struggle to fulfill the will of Hashem, as it will always be countered with our desire to act upon our *own* willful desires. Being "equal" implies being equal to *someone*. If in our attempt to bring about equality we merely mimic a man's role, of what value is our action? Even more so, what message are we imparting to our daughters? That being female is somehow lacking, faulty? Why is greater emphasis not placed on the value of women as Jewesses with unique

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and crucial roles to play in Jewish life? One does not have to be a man to be a good Jew. Jewish women, now more than ever, are educated both secularly and religiously. We are intellectually and spiritually infused with confidence that being female and Jewish does not relegate us to obscurity. Our task is one of greatness because we acknowledge ourselves as creations of Hashem and we know Whom we serve. □

Mazel tov, you are a Jewish lesbian

Rebecca Weiner

When I think of being a Jewish woman in the mid 1990s, I am struck by the *mazel* (good fortune) that I have. As a Jewish woman, I have had role models such as women rabbis, Golda Meir and Barbara Boxer to name a few. I have seen Jewish women rise in every field, in particular Jewish ones. I have seen the glass ceilings shatter like wedding kiddush cups and Jewish women rise to new professional heights. This is not to say that my experience of being a Jewish woman is as sweet as havdalah spices. However, the issues that impact upon me as a Jewish lesbian are more dire than the issues that impact upon me as a Jewish woman.

Some would be surprised to hear that my feelings of *mazel* also extend to my life as a Jewish lesbian. How can you feel lucky as a Jewish lesbian? How can luckiness be derived from the experience of homophobia, marginalization and the more subtle although not more benign experience of invisibility, hurdles I do not necessarily have to overcome in my experience as a Jewish woman?

Fortunate Struggles

Perhaps this *mazel* stems from the fact that this Jewish lesbian feminist was raised in the 70s, came out in the 80s and is thirty-something in the "gay" 90s. Perhaps it is also true because a large part of my life has been spent in the San Francisco Bay area, an area that is known for its large and powerful feminist gay, lesbian, bi-sexual population, an area where I know of three Jewish lesbian weddings that took place in the past nine months.

However, I don't believe my sense of *mazel* is derived from the fact that I wasn't born in a time or in an area when and where my homosexuality would have been

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impossible. My sense of luckiness at being a Jewish lesbian is instead derived from the struggle I have had to go through to have both identities live comfortably with each other. The struggle I have had to maintain some *Sholom Bayit* within my psychic house.

The internal narratives seething through my brain goes something like this, "You are a nice Jewish girl who will sit with your legs crossed, keep a semi-kosher home and wear your mother's wedding dress and bring a little *naches* into your parents' life" OR "You are a radical lesbian of the 90s who is freeing yourself and those who come after you from the oppressive hegemony of the patriarchy." Out of these divisive voices I have managed to create a third more moderate voice which states, "You will not abandon either your lesbian or Jewish identity in an attempt to have each."

Maintaining An Integrated Self

I feel lucky because I have maintained both identities strongly and fulfillingly. There have, of course, been times when I have felt that I had to give one up. When my Orthodox sister told me I was a shame to the Jewish people and I wouldn't be allowed to bring my lovers to her home, I felt a desire to run as far from black hats and Leviticus as my Nikes could take me. And when Christmas trees are erected in the Castro as "Holiday Trees", or gay culture seems to be reduced down to one big fashion show, I crave the genuineness of my Jewish roots. I find myself seeking the safe haven of any *shul*, even one that might not accept me.

So I return to the rich struggle of carving out a life for myself as a Jewish lesbian and it reminds me of the history of my ancestors. A history that does not include living lives as Jews easily or safely. This relationship to fear and danger places me closer to my ancestors than many of my heterosexual Jewish friends. They can attend High Holiday services, give money to Federation even subscribe to *Commentary* or *Tikkun* and feel that they are living full Jewish lives without thoughts of danger or fear.

This is not true for me. To have a full Jewish lesbian life, I expose myself to homophobia and/or antisemitism on a daily basis. Even for me to write this article I have to consider the ramifications. Should I ever move to the East coast, could I get a job as Jewish educator? Who will think less of me? Who will read this and feel all my *mitzvot* and good intentions are for naught because my life does not include a basic tenet of Judaism, marriage to a man?

However, I know if I don't struggle, if I don't risk homophobic rejection, I will be living my Jewish life absent of my full *kavanah*. This struggle has made me appreciate my Judaism, has made me relish the sweetness