

Jewish Women Watching: An Interview

Sh'ma: Why do you work from a position of anonymity?

JWW: We have chosen to remain anonymous to keep the focus where it belongs — on the issues rather than on our specific voices. We are mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers, and members of your bat mitzvah class.

Sh'ma: What are your goals?

JWW: We want to encourage and empower advocates of change at all levels of the community. We hope women and men will start questioning the number of women sitting on the boards of their organizations. We hope women and men will start asking questions about how Jewish money is being spent, and will demand more from the institutions that claim to represent them.

There is a gap between the perception that women's issues have been adequately "dealt with" and the reality that women are grossly underrepresented in our community and limited in their access to power. We keep looking for change in the Jewish community — that is, women sitting in Executive Director seats of major American Jewish organizations, women constituting more than an average of 25 percent of board members. This is not just about numbers but also about deep-seated atti-

tudes. As an organization, we point out the sexism in our community and call it unacceptable and sinful. Our anger is a fundamental and instrumental part of the process of change. It's outrageous that our community needs such tactics, but it does. We need radical pushers to render even moderate change.

Sh'ma: Are you in any way optimistic about advances of women in leadership?

JWW: In terms of leadership, the Jewish community is failing women. Many young women begin their professional lives within the Jewish community with the intention of becoming communal leaders. But they become so alienated and silenced that they abandon the Jewish communal workplace. Within the Jewish community, women are treated like a special interest group despite the fact that we represent more than half of the Jewish population. We are optimistic about the positive response we have received from our actions — not necessarily from organizations, but from individuals who agree with our message and want to take action themselves. It is this sort of grassroots commitment that we think has potential to bring about necessary changes in the Jewish community.

For more information on this organization, contact jewishwomenwatching@hotmail.com.

Leadership from a Feminist Pulpit

Yael Ridberg

congregant left me a wonderful message recently. She told me that one of her young daughters was playing after school with a male friend. They decided to play the game "shul." Upon deciding which role each child would play, the girl told her companion assertively that she would play the rabbi since boys cannot be rabbis.

When I entered rabbinic school a teacher of mine shared a similar tale, and I laughed of course at the sweet irony. That a similar thing happened to me almost a decade later still makes me smile. It underscores how the now landmark decisions of the liberal movements to ordain women as rabbis have been powerful lessons in "normalcy" for many young girls and boys throughout North America.

While I enjoy my position as the sole rabbi of the Reconstructionist-affiliated West End Synagogue on the Upper West Side of Manhattan (which, coincidentally, has women serving in all of its leadership positions — cantor, executive director, education director, and president), I am often reminded that disturbing assumptions are made about the liberal movements and feminism. Now that women and men share in the shaping of



our collective Jewish future, are women's issues adequately addressed?

After achieving so much, what more could we want? What more could we hope for? Is it enough? I would argue that we are not finished. Judaism is not in a "post-feminist" stage of development. On the contrary, we are just becoming comfortable with the notion that women's voices, women's history, and women's spirituality are worthy of our serious attention and inclusion.

Our task must include creating a Judaism that speaks to and holds onto the next generation of young Jews finding their way in the world. Many in this generation have grown up addressing

multiculturalism, identity politics, and spiritual rebirth. Religion, therefore, must be relevant, meaningful, and incorporate the inherent tensions between tradition and innovation, the past and the future. I see feminism as a strategy to negotiate this tension.

As a congregational rabbi, I do not believe that it is inevitable that the future generation of Jews need be disenfranchised from the past

or uninterested in the future. Feminism is the language we use to explore expansive images of God, to seek out the voices and experiences of women in our collective past without whom Jewish life would not be as rich and varied as it is. Jewish feminism is present when we explore different models of synagogue leadership, when we seek to balance our commitments to our work and our personal lives. Jewish feminism is the language we speak when our decision-making process in community is consensus-building rather than hierarchical politics. Jewish feminism is acknowledging that the acher — the other among us, be they gay and lesbian Jews, intermarried families, single Jews, or Jews by choice in our families and synagogues — enrich our Jewish culture and community.

As a Reconstructionist rabbi, I often take many of these things for granted. Egalitarianism is a core value; there is intellectual honesty about balancing the riches of the Jewish past with the promises of modernity; we are an inclusive community for Jews in the center and on the margins of mainstream Jewish life. We are often on the cutting edge — creating opportunities for women to gather and study with other women, creating women's rituals and interpretations of tradition, and revaluing rituals and mitzvot, thereby enhancing and expanding our bonds with tradition, not weakening them.

There is no question, however, that every gain opens up additional areas to explore and questions to address. Reconstructionist Judaism habituates its constituency to these changes in our culture and sensitizes us to the ongoing evolution within the religious civilization of the Jewish

people.

In my first pulpit position, a congregant once sat down in my office and said, "You're a woman and a feminist and I want to hear it from the bima." I wondered whether she had ever asked that of my senior (male) colleagues who also consider themselves feminists. I remember feeling taken aback. As I have recalled this anecdote over the years, I know that she

was right. I do feel a responsibility as a rabbi to speak the language of feminist leadership – not only because I am a woman but also because I deeply believe that I am obligated to raise the level of discourse in the Jewish community to one that is more inclusive.

We must continue to ask the question, "How can women be fully human and distinctively female in the Jewish community?" You can't just "add women and stir," as Dr. Lori Lefkovitz says. Real, systemic changes must continue to take place in a variety of settings and across the spectrum of Jewish life and observance. We need to shift paradigms, reprioritize, and reconstruct some areas of Jewish life — advancing a vital Judaism for everyone, where meaningful liturgy and texts, transformative rituals, and a rich spiritual life are options for us all.

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