

“Sexism is a Sin”: Feminism and American Jewish Life in the 21st Century
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On March 29, 2005 a press release found its way into Greater New York’s Jewish community. The statement announced that the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), the rabbinical school of the Conservative denomination of Judaism, would use its annual lecture series to unveil its new plan to “achieve gender and sexual equity in all ranks of the Conservative movement,” with the goal of reaching “full egalitarianism by the year 2010.” This was of course an ambitious proposal, ending the institution’s lack of attention to issues such as the ordination of gay and lesbian rabbis, pay inequities between male and female rabbis, and increased female leadership in all Conservative Jewish institutions.

The press release, as it turned out, was a hoax. Jewish Women Watching (JWW), a seven-year old organization with only a post office box, a website, and the credo “Sexism is a Sin,” issued the press release in order to expose the very issues that JTS had appeared to dedicate itself to when it began ordaining women rabbis in 1985. JWW periodically engages in guerrilla theatre, mails action pamphlets and issues press releases, all to expose sexism, homophobia, and other discriminatory practices in the American Jewish community. That community, they assert, has “narrow minded priorities.”

In her 1997 entry on “Jewish Feminism” for the *Jewish Women in America* encyclopedia, Paula Hyman noted the immense, positive impact of Feminism on the entire Jewish community. Feminist reforms had transformed some areas of Jewish tradition, historically grounded in patriarchy and exclusion, to allow for a more pluralistic model of worship and community life. Though she concluded with optimism, with the vision of “a diverse and inclusive Jewish community, created and sustained by women and men sharing responsibility and power,” she also noted then that “Jewish feminism faces particular challenges in the contemporary American Jewish community.”¹

¹ Paula Hyman, “Jewish Feminism,” entry for *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 699.

The purpose of this paper is to take a brief survey of parts of the American Jewish landscape nearly ten years after Hyman's writing. Over thirty years have passed since a group of Jewish women calling themselves *Ezrat Nashim*—a group that included Hyman—petitioned the Conservative movement's rabbis with the first agenda of Jewish feminism for Jewish women in religious and communal organizations²; over thirty years have passed since the first National Jewish Women's Conference in New York City; over thirty years have passed since Sally Priesand was ordained as the first female rabbi of the Reform movement. Certainly Hyman's 1997 conclusions still ring true: this is a time of revitalization and promise, as evidenced by the Conservative Movement's recent attention to the very topics JWW raised and developments in all of American Judaism's denominations; it's a time of new, inclusive institutions. It is also a time of increasing conservatism and disturbing moves toward exclusion, of "narrow minded priorities" and necessary watchdog groups like Jewish Women Watching.

The 2005 report of Ma'yan: The Jewish Women's Project, a program of the Jewish Community Center of Manhattan, confirms these diverging developments. It was based on thirty-eight focus groups in eight locations across the United States, on surveys and conversations with 365 Jewish women of diverse identities, life experiences, and affiliations. The conclusion of the report, whose title is "Listen to Her Voice: The Ma'yan Report, Assessing the Experiences of Women in the Jewish Community and their Relationships to Feminism"³ is that its findings are "cause for both celebration and concern."⁴

This paper does not purport to be comprehensive; instead, drawing on the activism of Jewish Women Watching, Ma'yan's study, and other research, it will review some of these promising institutions as it highlights new challenges and priorities for the Jewish community in the twenty-first century. Part of a larger project, this paper will analyze flashpoints, suggesting the tensions over Jewish Feminism in this conservative age. We have long known that the personal nature of our religious selves is political; the

² A brief statement by Hyman on the activism of *Ezrat Nashim* can be found in *The New York Jewish Week*, July 27, 1974, pg. 12: "The women of *Ezrat Nashim*... along with other Jewish women, are beginning to redress the ceremonial imbalance and age-old sexism within Judaism by developing meaningful rituals celebrating the birth and maturation of girls, and by drawing up nonsexist curricula for all levels of Jewish education."

³ <http://www.jccmanhattan.org/category.aspx?catid=1013>

⁴ <http://www.jccmanhattan.org/category.aspx?catid=1013>

Feminist movement in fact contributed to the idea that there is a multiplicity of ways—not only religious, but also cultural and political—to express Jewishness.

Just as the Feminist movement expanded its agenda to encompass issues of race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and age, so this larger agenda has come to affect the Jewish women's movement. And just as Feminism pushed liberating ideas into religious communities, so America's far-right conservatism now is pushing back against those ideas. The second Intifada in Israel/Palestine and 9/11 have shifted (or upended) American Jews' community priorities, creating alliances between Jewish religious conservatives and far-right politicians hostile to Feminism's expansive agenda.⁵

This is not the first era in which international anxieties were mapped onto expectations for woman's social roles. Today the anxiety's catchwords are security and terrorism; in the mid-twentieth century, they were security and communism.⁶ The danger to Jewish Feminists is that their expansive priorities are pushed aside and battled against, as we see a reversal in the steady progress toward the realization of their vision. In addition to these international anxieties, Jewish Feminist gains are precarious also because we have seen less progress in the world of communal leadership than we have in the area of Jewish ritual.

A scholarly examination of these developments is crucial to our understanding of contemporary Jewish life. No discipline can claim the mantle of a subfield such as Jewish Studies if it does not record the whole of the Jewish experience, the challenges posed from the margins of a community, the experiences of those who revitalize the multiple meanings of community belonging. As scholars, we also understand the importance of studying critiques posed from the margins. The critiques posed by those within the liberation movements of the twentieth century—the Women's, Civil, and Gay Rights Movements—helped us to see more clearly the distribution of social, economic, and political power. Today, these critiques emerge within religious discourse from individuals like Gay Episcopalian Bishops, Catholic liberation theologians, and Jewish Women Watching.

⁵ See Marjorie N. Feld, "Shul: A Keyword in the New Jewish Studies," *Shofar* (Forthcoming, Summer 2006).

⁶ See Elaine Tyler May's work on the nuclear family in the nuclear age, especially *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (Basic Books, 1988).

In this paper, I assert that these critiques of the American Jewish community help us to see its eroding middle ground: those who embrace reform of Judaism's patriarchal traditions and rituals continue to move toward the liberal end of the religious/political spectrum, while those who reject reform move further rightward. If we aim to bridge the divides between denominations—Hebrew College recently had a conference on a post-denominational community—or to unify American Jewry, these developments diminish the possibility of that hope being realized.

Religion and ritual

Columnist and author Francine Klagsbrun once observed that “Women may hold out the best hope for bridging the chasms between Jewish religious denominations in America.”⁷ Many Feminist rituals are now mainstream and cross-denominational—indeed, many incorporate secular, cultural Jews as well. I need hardly mention the movement of Feminist rituals from margin to mainstream. Female rabbis and Feminist seders, more gender-sensitive liturgies and more thoughtful God language: these are widely visible. We now have Jewish Feminist blogs, and the Jewish young woman-centered program “Rosh hodesh: it’s a girl thing.” In their report, Ma’yan finds that “women’s access to sacred texts, rituals and responsibilities of synagogue life, and positions of religious leadership, particularly the rabbinate, has vastly augmented their experience of Judaism.” Significantly, many of the focus group participants “credited their continued identification with Judaism to Feminism.”⁸

When Klagsbrun made that statement, she had just attended the first International Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy in 1997, where she saw that Orthodox women were joining women of other denominations in “revitalizing Jewish study in the United States.”⁹ Feminism’s progress within Orthodoxy, the most conservative of the

⁷ Francine Klagsbrun, “Women may hold out the best hope for bridging the chasms between Jewish religious denominations in America,” *Moment* 31 August 197, p. 30. Hebrew College, the only American transdenominational rabbinical school, recently held a conference on “Crossing Denominational Boundaries.” The conference agenda included “the prospect of a post-denominational, 21st-century American Judaism.” The College is also home to an upcoming conference on Feminism entitled “Heirs to a Revolution: Intergenerational Dialogues on Jewish Feminism.”

⁸ <http://www.jccmanhattan.org/category.aspx?catid=1013>

⁹ Francine Klagsbrun, “Women may hold out the best hope for bridging the chasms between Jewish religious denominations in America,” *Moment* 31 August 197, p. 30.

denominations and the most resistant to any reform of Judaism's patriarchal tradition, impressed Klagsbrun; it remains the site of both active Feminist reform and active resistance to that reform.

Indeed, Feminist developments within Modern Orthodoxy (also known as "centrist orthodoxy") are particularly relevant to this study. Unlike the Reform, Reconstructionist, and Renewal Movements which define themselves according to their reforming traditions, Modern Orthodoxy's commitment to reconciling Jewish law and the modern world makes it a particularly revealing site to study the possibilities and limitations for the completion of the Feminist agenda. One observer of the second Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy—with twice the attendance from year one— noted that "the tensions that discord has created for Orthodox Jews as they approach the 21st century seem best exemplified by issues pertaining to women and their role in traditional Jewish life."¹⁰ Blu Greenberg, a founder of the organization, testified to a "quiet but profound revolution" in Orthodox Judaism over the past few decades. Women, who must sit separately from men and historically have had no role in the liturgy of Orthodox synagogue worship, are now taking more active roles.¹¹ As the movement struggles to find justification for inclusion in Jewish law, dissension and resistance result.

New women's liturgical participation and leadership are the results of Modern Orthodox lay women's Feminist activism. The Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, a New-York based adult-learning program that began in 1979 as an institute for women's Jewish textual study, is a center of this Feminist energy. Its members have converted several congregations to a style of worship that is said to "occupy a theological middle ground between Orthodoxy's commitment to stringent gender distinctions and Conservative Judaism's 20-year march toward full egalitarianism."¹² These congregations, which still have mechitzas, or dividers between the sexes, are beginning to

¹⁰ Karynne Naftoline, "Turnout Doubles at Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy," *Jewish Advocate* 26 February 1998, p. 1

¹¹ Stacy A. Teicher, "A Balancing Act," *Christian Science Monitor*, Jan. 21, 2004, p. 16.

¹² Ami Eden, "Gender Taboos Fall at New Orthodox Prayer Services," *Forward*, 20 September 2002, p. 1.

allow women to read from the Torah.¹³ Shira Hadasha, known as an “Orthodox-egalitarian” congregation in Jerusalem and Manhattan, also follows this new model.¹⁴

Training for women to be *yoatzot halacha* (advisers on Jewish law), female experts in laws of sexuality and fertility, is another development that is pushing the boundaries of women’s enfranchisement in Modern Orthodox Judaism.¹⁵ This marks the first time in many congregations that women leaders can talk to women congregants about women’s health and family issues.

Importantly, leaders of the Modern Orthodox flagship of Yeshiva University (YU) do not sanction these Feminist transformations of ritual. Indeed, YU’s resistance to reform led to the 1999 founding of Edah, a grass roots organization “needed,” as observers noted, “because right-wing forces in the [Orthodox] movement were stifling debate on several key fronts, including women’s ritual participation.”¹⁶ Edah’s website reads that its members have “the courage to be modern and Orthodox”; “it is only fitting,” the organization asserts, “that the role which women play within the modern Orthodox community match their important positions within the secular world in terms of personal and intellectual fulfillment.”¹⁷ At Edah’s 2003 conference, the organization’s founder, Rabbi Saul Berman, stressed that it’s possible to “believe in the absolute authority of one’s religion while also embracing diversity and tolerance.”¹⁸

Orthodox Jewish communal leaders, including those with the power to sanction a tradition for the community, have largely responded to these innovations by either distancing themselves from Feminism or, like Yeshiva University, rejecting the reforms outright. They fear that the ideas of women’s equality compromise Jewish law and thus the core identity of the denomination. Even Edah leaders have been clear that they are not “staking out specific policy positions”; an observer noted that “one casualty of this

¹³ “Women: New Role, New Opportunity,” *The New York Jewish Week*. 3 August 2001, p. 5.

¹⁴ Ruth Seligman, “Orthodox Women Read Torah in Mixed Services,” April 28, 2006, Women’s enews, <http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/1552/context/archive>.

¹⁵ Rachel Kranson, “Orthodoxy and Women: Not Egalitarian But a Step in the Right Direction,” *Lilith* Winter 2001, Issue 4, p. 6

¹⁶ *Forward* 20 July 2001, p. 4

¹⁷ www.edah.org

¹⁸ Debra Nussbaum Cohen, “Between Torah and Democracy: Edah Conference asserts Modern Orthodox Jews Should Bridge Fundamentalism and Tolerance,” *New York Jewish Week* (Manhattan edition), Feb. 21, 2003, p. 8.

approach appears to be the Feminist agenda.”¹⁹ Rabbi Jonathan Rosenblatt, of the Riverdale Jewish Center, who chose to hire a *yoetzet halacha* for his synagogue, likewise distanced himself from this agenda. “This is not a revolution. This is not about feminism,” Rosenblatt told the *New York Jewish Week*. “This is about Torah...I’m just a country rabbi. I’m not Branch Rickey.” Rickey owned the Brooklyn Dodgers when they broke baseball’s color line by hiring Jackie Robinson.²⁰ To Rosenblatt, women’s leadership represents an undesirable and revolutionary extreme—as racial desegregation was an extreme—that diminishes Modern Orthodoxy’s claim to a middle ground.

Samuel Heilman, a professor of sociology and Jewish Studies at the City University of New York, cites copious evidence in asserting the rise of Jewish fundamentalism. “The modernists,” he writes, including those who advocate women’s liturgical participation and leadership, “now see themselves as on the margins” of Modern Orthodoxy.²¹ A scholar of Jewish fundamentalism, he charts its rise as emerging from multiple factors: first among them is “the perceived decline of American culture beginning in the late 1960s and 1970s,” the fear that standing “with a foot in that culture” would mean “a step down the slippery slope of religious diminution and cultural assimilation.”²² The reference here is to the liberation movements of those decades, with Feminism and Gay Rights playing an important role.

One of the institutions that is a product of that modern culture, working toward a pluralist, Feminist vision of inclusion that, not coincidentally, reinvents a ritual traditionally for women, has also run up against this fundamentalist resistance. Mayyim Chayyim is a kosher community mikveh, a ritual bath, and an education center in Boston. Mikvehs have long been the province of Orthodox women, who use them to follow the laws of niddah, of ritual purity, according to their menstrual cycles. Mayyim Chayyim seeks “to reclaim and reinvent one of our most ancient Jewish rituals...for contemporary

¹⁹ Ami Eden. “Letter from Midtown: Orthodox Centrists; The Good Times are Killing Us.” *Forward* 23 February 2001, p. 1

²⁰ Steve Lipman, “Heady Times for Orthodox Women,” *The New York Jewish Week* (Manhattan Edition), May 21, 2004, p. 1. See also Aaron Leibel, “Women and Jewish Law: Ex-Silver Spring Resident first in U.S. to Hold Position of *Yoetzet Halacha*,” *Washington Jewish Week*, Oct. 7, 2004, p. 9.

²¹ Gary Rosenblatt, “Modern Orthodox Outnumber Haredim Here,” *The New York Jewish Week* (Manhattan Edition), Feb. 25, 2005.

²² Samuel Heilman, “Jews and Fundamentalism,” *Jewish Political Studies Review* 17 (Spring 2005): 185.

spiritual uses and to make this new, sacred space open and accessible to all Jews...”²³ One of its institutional priorities, listed in its mission statement, is to “serve as an innovative, pluralistic Jewish institution.”

Anita Diamant, journalist and author, founded Mayyim Chayyim because of her experience during her husband’s conversion. She found that the use of the Boston mikveh use was reserved almost exclusively for Orthodox women observing *niddah*, with anyone else tolerated or explicitly excluded. The feeling of rabbis and clients during the few hours reserved for conversions was one of “second-class citizenship.”²⁴

Diamant spoke with others about her experience, and the idea for a mikveh expanded outward from her own story into a broader one about individuals who were excluded from traditional rituals. Mayyim Hayyim adopted a Feminist vision; as Diamant described in a recent magazine article, “her timing was fortunate; ‘There’s a whole generation of women who are learned and learning and feeling a new authenticity in their Jewish selves.’”²⁵ Support was easy to find, reports Aliza Kline, executive director of Mayyim Hayyim, because non-Orthodox rabbis and laypeople saw the need to “dignify and celebrate” conversions and other ceremonies.

Mayyim Hayyim’s “triumphant success,” according to Kline, demonstrates that they met a real need. Since it opened on May 14, 2005, they have had two thousand immersions: people who want to use the ritual in traditional ways, for conversion or in line with purity laws or before marriage; also people who are reinventing rituals, after a miscarriage or another loss or to mark an important personal milestone. Three days after they opened, they had their first lesbian brides. “For centuries, people lied to get this experience,” Kline says, “but at this time you are naked, and you should be most open and able to be who you are.”²⁶ They have built relationships with Keshet, the Jewish gay/lesbian/bi/trans organization in Boston, with Jewish domestic violence centers, and with hospitals. Theirs is one of few disabled-accessible mikvehs in the U.S.

Even those who find mikveh use problematic from a Feminist standpoint would no doubt find the stories of this mikveh inspiring, a testament to the institution’s success

²³ http://www.mayyimhayyim.org/aboutus_history.asp?page=aboutus

²⁴ Aliza Klein, Executive Director, Mayyim Hayyim, Interview with author, 3 April 2006.

²⁵ Deborah Fineblum Raub, “Total Immersion,” *Hadassah Magazine* (May 2006); <http://www.hadassah.org/pageframe.asp?section=news&page=per.html&header=per&size=50>

²⁶ Aliza Klein, Executive Director, Mayyim Hayyim, Interview with author, 3 April 2006.

in creating a middle ground outside of formal denominations. One Orthodox woman who had a double mastectomy did not want the so-called “mikveh ladies” to see her; she uses Mayyim Hayyim so that her husband can be her sole ritual guide. I myself was a visitor to the mikveh to see tiny Shoshana Tanowitz be immersed into the culture and tradition of Judaism; Shoshana was the new daughter of my close friend, who had traveled all the way to China to adopt Shoshi into her family. Recently, the volunteer mikveh guides, men and women in their 50s and 60s from all parts of the American Jewish denominational spectrum, went through training that has allowed Mayyim Hayyim to be “transcomfortable”—a safe place for transgender people who want to use the mikveh.

And yet that success is limited by the fact that Mayyim Hayyim is not accepted by all as a truly communal institution. While the Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist and Renewal rabbis in the Boston area lent their support, the Orthodox rabbis did not. Though the mikveh is kosher, because its oversight is done by Conservative rabbis, the Orthodox community refuses to acknowledge it as acceptable. Rabbi Moshed Krupka, the executive director of programming at the Orthodox Union in New York, responded to Mayyim Hayyim with the following statement: “The fact that people would tend to reinvent the mikvah and its usage to suit their own particular needs and agendas I think belittles and diminishes the significance of the mikvah and what its core purpose is.”²⁷

Though Diamant and Kline refer to it as a “community mikveh,” Orthodox leaders converge political and cultural resistance in referring to it as a “liberal mikveh.” That means the Orthodox woman whose husband guides her is not officially allowed to be at Mayyim Hayyim. That means that Conservative rabbis there are always, in the words of Kline, “looking over their right shoulder.”²⁸ That means that Kline’s five years of meetings with Orthodox leaders have not borne fruit.

The Ma’yan report alerts us the rarity of institutions with expansive visions like that of Mayyim Hayyim. “Jewish women continue to experience exclusion from Jewish communal institutions and synagogues based on their gender, age, class, ethnicity/race, sexual orientation, gender identity, stage of life, and their partnerships/marriages to non-Jews,” the report reads. “More thoughtful attention must be given to the multiple vectors

²⁷ Katie Zezima, “A Bath for Ritual Cleansing of Jewish Men and Women,” *The New York Times*, July 3, 2004, Religion Journal, B6.

²⁸ Aliza Klein, Executive Director, Mayyim Hayyim, Interview with author, 3 April 2006.

of identity individuals carry.”²⁹ Ma’yan encourages Jewish Feminist organizations to locate organizations that work with a pluralist model of inclusion, as Mayyim Hayyim does: “partner with some of these organizations in a way that takes seriously the gendered component of the issue at hand.”³⁰ Following this model, the report asserts, there will be more success stories of inclusion and participation with the goal of more Jewish women feeling recognized and encouraged to participate in the community.

Communal Institutions and Leadership

The rarity of institutions like Mayyim Hayyim points us back to the data in Ma’yan’s report and to the critiques of Jewish Women Watching. Brief glimpses into the politics of leadership and practice in the Jewish community offer evidence of an unfinished Feminist revolution, of patriarchy’s firm grasp and of homophobia and racism’s continued impact. Because Jewish Feminism takes as a tenet the survival of an inclusive Jewish communal life, the movement must continue to address these concerns, perhaps especially in these conservative times.

The most glaring evidence of the unfinished nature of the Feminist revolution in Jewish life is in the lack of women at the head of major Jewish organizations. A Ma’yan study found that of forty-five major Jewish organizations, nearly two-fifths had fewer than 15% women on their boards.³¹ The gender gap in the Conservative Rabbinate, in particular, is profound. In the world of work, women do not earn dollar for dollar with men, and this is no exception.³² In a recent study sponsored by the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly, and with the support of the Jewish Women’s Foundation of New York, Steven Cohen and Judith Schol analyzed the progress made by women rabbis since JTS began ordaining women in 1985. Their findings were as follows: male rabbis earn more than female rabbis, even in seemingly comparable jobs; male rabbis have the pulpits of large congregations, the jobs with the most pay and the most prestige; female

²⁹ <http://www.jccmanhattan.org/category.aspx?catid=1013>

³⁰ <http://www.jccmanhattan.org/category.aspx?catid=1013>

³⁰ <http://www.jccmanhattan.org/category.aspx?catid=1013>

³¹ Shifra Bronznick, “Unleashing Women’s Leadership Potential,” *Forward* March 21, 2003, <http://www.forward.com/issues/2003/03.03.21/oped1.html>

³² The gender gap is a problem facing clergy in almost all “liberal denominations” of American religions. One rabbi stated that it was “time to break the ‘stained glass ceiling,’” Gerald L. Zelizer, “Time to Break the ‘Stained Glass’ Ceiling,” *USA Today* 16 September 2004, 11A.

rabbis report less job satisfaction than male rabbis; women complain of hurtful gender- and age-related remarks in their work lives. The arrival of children has the opposite effect on the careers of women and men: men are more likely to move to positions as congregational rabbis and women more likely to move into part-time work; nearly three times as many women as men are unmarried.³³ Jewish Women Watching responded to these statistics with their protest action to draw attention to the gap between the Conservative Movement's espoused vision of equity and the realities for the Movement's leadership.

The Conservative movement leadership is also wrestling with another crucial Feminist issue of inclusion, the ordination of openly gay and lesbian rabbis. The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards voted against ordination and commitment ceremonies for same-sex couples in 1992.³⁴ But this was before the latest wave of the Gay Rights Movement pushed its way into American Jewish life, with the public visibility of organizations like Gay and Lesbian Yeshiva/Day School alumni, and OrthoDykes, to name just two in New York; this was before the documentary *Trembling Before G-d*, about the struggles of gay Orthodox Jews, began conversations among Orthodox and non-Orthodox communities. The Conservative Movement is divided on gay ordination, struggling to rule on the issue according to Jewish law as it tries to maintain a middle ground between Reform and Orthodox Judaism. It also wants to remain an appealing life choice for young Jews. The signs of what might transpire are mixed: The choice of JTS's new chancellor, Professor Arnold Eisen, was greeted with enthusiasm by supporters of gay ordination because he supports it³⁵; other insiders have spoken publicly about an "exodus to the right" should the Movement decide in favor of gay ordination.³⁶ The vote on this latest challenge of inclusion is scheduled for December 2006.

³³ <http://www.jtsa.edu/rabbinical/women/ras.pdf>

³⁴ Laurie Goodstein, "Conservative Jews to Consider Ending a Ban on Same-Sex Unions and Gay Rabbis," *The New York Times*, March 6, 2006.

³⁵ Chanan Tigay, "New JTS Head Favors Gay Rabbis, but calls Halachah: Non-negotiable" *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* 12 April 2006; Jennifer Siegel, "JTS Pick: 'Heschel My Hero,' Yes to Ordaining Gay Rabbis," *The Forward* 14 April 2006.

³⁶ Rabbi Neil Gillman, a philosophy professor at JTS, predicts that if the Conservative Movement approves the ordination of gay and lesbian rabbis and moves further toward a Feminist pluralist model, the Union for Traditional Judaism, founded by the right wing of the Conservative Movement after JTS began ordaining women in 1983, "will have a great burst of excitement," as an "exodus to the right" becomes reality,

Another challenge to Jewish institutions is the growing racial diversity of the American Jewish community, the integration of faces like that of Shoshana Tanowitz. A new study by scholars at the Institute for Jewish and Community Research is the first on Jews of color; it finds that 20% of Jewish America is ethnically diverse.³⁷ And yet Jews of color experience profound marginalization and exclusion in mainstream Jewish institutions. Jewish men and women of color report being blocked from entering a shul by security guards; one woman reported that “once she gets into the sanctuary, she has to deal with it all over again, when other worshippers presume she’s not Jewish and is there as a nanny or a friend.”³⁸ Jews of color express their need “not to be exoticized and not to be treated like strangers,” not to be constantly forced to authenticate their Jewish identity.³⁹ Participants in the Ma’yan study echoed these concerns: “The Jewish community is changing, becoming less white,” observed one participant, “[and]its norms must also change.” Just as the Feminist Movement challenged the narrow definition of Jew as man, the report concluded that it must now challenge the narrow definition of Jew as Ashkenazi and white.⁴⁰

Here too, a small number of new institutions are responding to this call for inclusion that grew out of both the Civil Rights and Feminist Revolutions. Ayecha is an Orthodox organization that runs workshops, programs, and retreats, with a goal of “learning, teaching, and leveraging Jewish Diversity.”⁴¹ The Jewish Multiracial Network sponsors summer camps in order to “create opportunities for learning, nurturing and support for a large and growing part of the Jewish community that often feels marginalized by mainstream Jewish organizations.”⁴²

[Chanan Tigay, “As Conservatives Question Halacha, Some Predict an Exodus to the Right,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, January 5, 2006.]

³⁷ Gary Tobin, Diane Tobin, and Scott Rubin, *In Every Tongue: The Racial and Ethnic Diversity of the Jewish People* (Institute for Jewish and Community Research), 2005.

³⁸ Debra Nussbaum Cohen, “Finding Their Voice: Through a Burgeoning Number of Grassroots Groups, Jews of Color are Putting Their Concerns on the Communal Agenda. But a Sense of Exclusion Hovers,” *The New York Jewish Week* (Manhattan Edition), Nov. 29, 2002, p. 12.

³⁹ Debra Nussbaum Cohen, “Finding Their Voice: Through a Burgeoning Number of Grassroots Groups, Jews of Color are Putting Their Concerns on the Communal Agenda. But a Sense of Exclusion Hovers,” *The New York Jewish Week* (Manhattan Edition), Nov. 29, 2002, p. 12; Johanna Ginsberg, “For Those who ‘don’t look Jewish,’ the Search for Acceptance is No Joke,” *Jewish News* (Whippany, N.J.), Feb. 29, 2004, p. 17.

⁴⁰ <http://www.jccmanhattan.org/category.aspx?catid=1013>

⁴¹ <http://www.ayechea.org/>.

⁴² http://www.isabellafreedman.org/jmn/jmn_intro.shtml.

In the last five years, just as many of these organizations were beginning to respond to that call, there was a noticeable shift in community priorities. Amy Posner, then director of the Jewish Multiracial Network, reported that 9/11 and Israel were “perceived as more critical.”⁴³ The Network lost most of its funding and was forced to fund its smaller programs through individual gifts. While the demands of those marginalized by mainstream Jewish institutions remain no less urgent, the struggle for inclusion of Jews of color, like the struggles of others on the margins, is threatened in these conservative times.

Politics

The rightward shift of Jewish institutions in this age of anxiety—whether grounded in concerns over the identity of a denomination, or Israeli or American “security”—endangers the gains Jewish Feminists have made in all denominations, all communal institutions. At best, the priorities of the Jewish Feminist agenda are supplanted, pushed aside. At worst, those priorities, along with past achievements, are criticized and undone. Just as Feminism bled into the politics of Jewish lives, spiritual and communal, so now the far-right political conservatism of our times pushes inward to these lives, and pushes against Jewish Feminism’s achievements of opening possibilities for women, Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Bixsexual Jews and Jews of color.

Rick Santorum’s leadership as a U.S. senator from Pennsylvania and his campaign for reelection presents a flashpoint in this war on Feminist issues. Santorum has held traditional, hard-line, right-wing positions, including supporting the Iraq war, privatizing Social Security, and ending women’s right to choice. His recent book, *It Takes a Family*, targets teachers’ unions, “unelected judges,” abortion rights, and the liberal “village elders” for the decline of America’s “social capital”; he reserves special language, though, for Feminism’s role in the destruction of the so-called “nuclear family.” Radical Feminism, according to Santorum, is “one of the core philosophies of the village elders.” And because radical Feminists “refuse to...value the essential work women have done in being the primary caregivers of the next generation,” he deems

⁴³ Debra Nussbaum Cohen, “Finding Their Voice: Through a Burgeoning Number of Grassroots Groups, Jews of Color are Putting Their Concerns on the Communal Agenda. But a Sense of Exclusion Hovers,” *The New York Jewish Week* (Manhattan Edition), Nov. 29, 2002, p. 12.

radical Feminism's agenda as a "misogynistic crusade."⁴⁴ Protestors have attended his events "dressed at 1950s housewives and carrying rolling pins, hoist[ing] signs labeling Santorum a sexist."⁴⁵ A recent article in the *New York Times* focused on Santorum's election campaign as a "Big Race," as an indicator not only of President Bush's popularity, but also as a crucial test of the far-right's popularity on issues like abortion and same-sex marriage.

Why is this of concern to Jewish Feminists? Santorum counts a substantial number of Jewish votes and Jewish donor groups in his reelection camp because of his being, in the words of the press, "one of the strongest advocates for Israel in the U.S. Senate."⁴⁶ "Pro-Israel" organizational donations comprise 13% of his single-issue contributions, as compared to 2% for "Gun Rights" and less than .1% for "Abortion Policy/Pro-Life."⁴⁷ He is one of only eight Congressional candidates to receive more than \$40,000 in Pro-Israel PAC contributions so far in 2006.⁴⁸ Jews make up 2.3 percent of Pennsylvania's population, but Santorum's following in the Jewish community earns him publicity in the Jewish media because it is seen as its own litmus test. Does Jewish support for Santorum signal a "realignment" of the Jewish vote to the Republican Party? Do the majority of American Jews feel as *New York Times* columnist David Brooks does, that liberal Jews and the evangelical far-right are a "natural alliance" on some issues?⁴⁹ One Orthodox Jewish man from Philadelphia was quoted as saying he would vote for Santorum because of his "pro-Israel positions." "I'm much more focused on his international policies," he said. "The domestic front is not that important to me."⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Rick Santorum, *It Takes a Family: Conservatism and the Common Good* (Wilmington, Delaware: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2005), 95.

⁴⁵ Joshua Runyan, "Santorum Faces Test in 'Must Win' Suburbs," *Jewish Exponent* (Philadelphia), August 11, 2005, p. 1.

⁴⁶ Matthew E. Berger, "Pro-Israel Conservative Draws Support in Pennsylvania Race," *Jewish News of Greater Phoenix*, July 15, 2005.

⁴⁷ Based on data released on April 24th, 2006, "Pro-Israel" contributions were \$52,000 of his \$405,723 in single issue/ideology contributions. In comparison, "Abortion Policy/Pro-Life" donations were \$500, and "Gun Rights" donations were \$6,950. The data is from the Center for Responsive Politics, accessed on their website, <http://www.opensecrets.org/pacs/memberprofile.asp?cid=N00001380&cycle=2006&remove=Q05>, on May 16, 2006.

⁴⁸ This information was accessed in the archives of the Washington Report on Middle Eastern Affairs, http://www.wrmea.com/archives/May-June_2006/0605031.html on May 16, 2006.

⁴⁹ David Brooks, "A Natural Alliance," *The New York Times*, May 26, 2005, A29.

⁵⁰ Joshua Runyan, "Santorum Faces Test in 'Must Win' Suburbs," *Jewish Exponent* (Philadelphia), August 11, 2005, p. 1.

Jewish Feminists need to be aware that American Jews' far-right position on Israeli politics finds them joining what Sidney Blumenthal has called the "theocons." These theocons, such as Santorum, are at war with modernity, and women's fundamental rights are part of that war.⁵¹ Jewish alliances with Santorum and others on the far right is cause for great concern to those of us who value Feminist contributions to all denominations of American Judaism, Jewish communal life, and to American politics overall.

In 2002, Jewish Women Watching responded to the increasingly numerous, visible alliances between American Jews and far-right political figures like Pat Robertson.⁵² JWW warned of the dangers in these alliances in a protest action pamphlet entitled "Strange Bedfellows," to be distributed in shuls across the country. Attached were condoms emblazoned with the message "Practice Safe Politics" to warn the Jewish community to avoid "getting into bed with the Christian Right Wing."⁵³

Jewish Women Watching's current campaign draws attention to the war on women's bodies, focusing on the Bush administration's policies on international sexual health. They ask "How can Jews be silent while the government imposes its Christian agenda on our bodies?" They call for activism against The Global Gag Rule, reinstated by President Bush in 2001, which prohibits any international organization receiving US funds from performing abortions, providing education about reproductive choice, or referring clients to safe abortion providers; they call for domestic abortion rights, an end to federal funding for abstinence-only education, and medical research regulated by science, not Jesus.

Jewish Women Watching's campaigns have often been prescient and thus, worth watching as the culture war slowly evolves. Though American Jewish liberals, like other American liberals, grow increasingly horrified by the bloodshed in Iraq, the far right's hold on the Republican Party grows stronger, and Feminist issues of choice and other basic rights are increasingly under attack. Though nearly 80% of American Jews voted

⁵¹ Sidney Blumenthal, "Theocons vs. Neocons," *Salon*, March 4, 2004, http://dir.salon.com/story/opinion/blumenthal/2004/03/04/culture_war/index.html

⁵² To cite one example: Pat Robertson visited Temple Beth Shalom in Framingham, Massachusetts, in April 2003 to speak about "The Importance of American Support for Israel"; the Jewish protestors outside were removed at the request of the synagogue's members. Eun Lee Koh, "Jewish Community to Hear Robertson; Some Members Wary of His Views," *The Boston Globe*, April 13, 2003.

⁵³ Information about their actions is available at www.jewishwomenwatching.org.

against President Bush in 2004, he did make inroads into the 15% of Jews who, like the man interviewed for the Santorum poll, saw Israel as a central issue.⁵⁴ As the critiques posed by JWW suggest, the war on women has become a major front in the war on terror, putting new pressures on the Jewish community's already fractious debate over Feminist inclusiveness.

Conclusion

In 1983, looking back at her ten years of Jewish Feminist activism and scholarship, Paula Hyman told a story about a meeting she attended: an "alternative" Jewish institution had gathered, focused on including more women on the board, and when the meeting ended one of the men said to Hyman, "thinking it amusing, 'You know, I'm just an old male chauvinist sweetiepie. If anyone can convince me not to be a sexist, Paula, it will be you.'" Without skipping a beat, Hyman replied: "how would you like it if someone came up to you and said: 'If anyone can convince me not to be an anti-Semite, it will be you?'"

The equation of anti-Feminism with anti-Semitism is a compelling one, as hate is equal to hate is equal to resistance to equality. Today, we can extend that equation to include homophobia and racism, punishing the poor and destroying the environment. As Jewish Women Watching reminds us today, sexism is a sin; as Hyman said in 1983, "We are... calling Judaism morally to account...for this fundamental and basic moral issue...Judaism is on trial in some ways for us. It must be able to contend with this moral issue - and resolve it."⁵⁵

In 2006, Judaism remains on trial. Klagsbrun and others once thought Feminism capable of bridging denominational gaps. The question lingers: can American Jewish women and men meet on a middle ground of equal treatment, representation, and access to ritual, regardless of their denomination or affiliation? With Feminism embattled in places throughout America and the American Jewish community—with one side endorsing a Feminist vision, and the other steadfastly resisting it—the middle ground appears to be ebbing away. That extremists on either side of the Feminist debate have

⁵⁴ Eric Uslaner and Mark Lichbach, "Why the GOP Can't Convert the Jewish Vote," *Forward* Feb. 24, 2006.

⁵⁵ "After a Decade of Jewish Feminism, THE JEWRY IS STILL OUT," *Lilith* Dec. 31, 1983, p. 20.

had trouble finding a middle ground is not surprising. But institutional rigidity and a growing political conservatism among many Jews has, at best, made this pursuit more difficult, and at worst, actively undermined Feminist achievements. For these reasons it has been difficult to build upon the extraordinary gains visible in the area of Jewish ritual.

Rabbi Rona Shapiro of Ma'yan wrote recently that “Feminism has resonated in the Jewish community because Judaism ultimately promulgates a revolutionary message of justice and equality. It is time to finish the revolution.”⁵⁶ Scholars must record this revolutionary work alongside contests over its continued agenda. Only by examining these developments and critiques can we have a sense of how far we have yet to travel.

⁵⁶ Rona Shapiro, “What Feminism Can Teach Jewish Organizations,” *Forward*, 15 April 2005, 11.