

Jewish Women

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

There are of course Jewish women and Jewish women, and any generalization on either word is plain silly. But Jewish women who wish to remain loyal to the religious tradition in all its Divine magnificence and Human interference can, if they step out of line or try to deal with rabbinic authority, have a very tough time.

In 1994 admirable UK community leader, Rosalind Preston OBE, produced a report on the state of Jewish women in the UK. It highlighted the overwhelming feeling that women were excluded from communal leadership, that Orthodox institutions gave them no voice, and they suffered disabilities in their encounter with rabbinic authority, and felt disadvantaged by Jewish Law. Britain is different than the USA because it is a community in which Orthodox authority dominates. Many of the issues are not relevant in Reform communities, which have their own specific problems to deal with. At the time, well-meaning rabbis in the UK assured Mrs. Preston that they would deal with the problems. I knew it was all window dressing and PR and that nothing would change. Fifteen years later nothing has changed. I was accused then of being a cynical rebel for predicting this.

The Board has just produced a new report, "Connection, Continuity and Community: British Jewish Women Speak Out". You would not know it was not written in 1994. For it only reiterates that nothing has changed. Any community that disenfranchises, ignores or underestimates its female talent, cuts off 50% or more of its pool of talent, must be stark raving mad. It is a symptom of atrophy, conformity and mediocrity. This cannot make sense and it is one of the reasons why the UK suffers a serious Jewish brain drain (including every one of my parents' children).

It is true that UK Jewry is small in number, weak in academic institutions, and limited in talent. But still there are plenty of examples of how things can happen outside of and despite the establishment. It is the evil of British institutional authority, the dead hand of the establishment, the exclusion of talent from the hierarchy, that is as much to blame for wasting potential as the sad complacency, not to say cowardice, of most rabbinic leadership, and the marginalization of the few who would see change.

Of course there are many, many Orthodox women who are perfectly happy, who live fulfilled lives and, within their parameters, do a tremendous amount of good (and it helps if you have lots of money). But just as I believe a just society can be judged by how it treats its poorest and most disadvantaged citizens, so the test of a successful system is how it deals with those who do not fit in or who come up against the system. On all those counts Orthodoxy in the UK has failed far more obviously than either Israel or the USA, the two main Jewish communities of the world today, and I am not claiming for one minute that all is rosy in either of those places, either.

It cannot be right, nor can it be justified, that women are in any way disadvantaged under Jewish law. But they are. Husbands blackmail over divorce and too many rabbis only encourage them. Recalcitrant or absentee husbands will not release ex-wives to remarry and the authorities wash their hands and pretend there is no solution. In previous generations, rabbis took steps to redress grievances. This is not an academic or halachic piece so I am not going to cite chapter and verse, but I can assure you that legal literature is replete with evidence that a thousand years ago rabbis were more gutsy and less mentally paralyzed, indeed less politicized, than they are today, and were not afraid to use their authority and actually force divorce or annul marriages if nothing else worked.

Jewish Law does allow for ways of redressing the balance; it is a scandal that we have to rely on civil courts to do our own religious dirty work. If the boot were on the other foot and men were at a disadvantage, believe you me, they would soon find a halachic way of sorting it out. Nothing casts Jewish Law in a more negative light than the implication it is stymied and needs other systems to help it out of a fix of its own creation.

I fail to understand the argument that Jewish law does not allow women to be appointed to leadership roles, because according to Maimonides the Torah only talks about appointing kings. Why no earlier source than a man living under Islam? So better a dumb male than a bright female? When Deborah was a Judge, or Queen Salome Alexandra cleaned up the messes her husbands made, were the authorities then unaware of Torah? How much of our current paralysis stems from living so long under Christian and Muslim regimes that considered women inferior and put pressure on us to toe the line?

I am in favor of ritual differences. I do think we need to encourage more and different and female forms of spirituality, instead of butchering existing models that were not designed to be all things for all people. Why would one want to conflate Lithuanian and Hassidic prayer, instead of retaining variety and offering options? But when it comes to the equivalent of civil law, there can be no situation that leaves women, disadvantaged and in tears. According to His own words, the tears of the oppressed offend God, and yet too many rabbis act as if that did not matter.