

Women in Orthodox Judaism

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

You may wonder why, in a world full of so many real problems, are Orthodox rabbis of various organizations, dimensions, and denominations so busy condemning, decrying, banning, and excoriating women for the wicked, heretical crime of wanting to teach Torah and pray? Are they serious? Aren't studying Torah and prayer crucial elements in getting closer to God in Orthodoxy, too? Are they telling us that women have neither brains nor souls? Really? What's the real issue?

For thousands of years arrogant males thought women were stupid, seductive witches who could not add up one and one and whose only functions were to produce and rear babies, cook and to lie flat for their husbands. Some may be surprised to learn that this is no longer the case. After all, in the most ultra-religious conservative homes women often go out to work at serious professional jobs at which they are very good and earn the money to keep the home going. Once upon a time, men refused to allow women to vote, to get degrees, or to open bank accounts. Now they can run states, governments, universities, Fortune 500 companies, MI6, and outdo most men at college and in any area they allowed to compete. I doubt there are many men who could beat Serena Williams at tennis.

So what are we witnessing? Is it a reaction against Western values, against feminism, against Reform, or is it fear that opening too much to women will lead to their dominating or taking over most of the communal jobs and threatening the cozy hegemony of male chauvinists? Are they frightened that a learned, scholarly woman will know enough to contradict her husband or, worse still, her local rabbi?

Yes, you can point to a source in the Talmud Sotah that you shouldn't teach Torah to women (two thousand years ago), but there were plenty of other opinions. The late, great Gaon J.B. Soloveitchik actually wrote a letter (available on the internet) insisting that it was right and essential to teach women Torah to the highest level. Oh, for the great men who once led Judaism and had guts. But I do not despair (only of religious bureaucracies). Where leadership fails, grassroots activity flourishes. In the USA and, more notably, in Israel, institutions that teach Torah to women are booming and producing outstanding scholars. They become halachic advisors, pleaders in rabbinic courts, and educators. What earthly reason can there be for them NOT to give of their brilliance to communities and congregations?

How can it make any sense for any culture or any group of human beings who wish to preserve their traditions to exclude fully 50% of their talent? How can it make sense for leadership of such groups to fail to address concerns and needs and complaints of fully half their membership?

You might say that once you open the door to changes, you never know where they will lead. But if all that is being asked by Orthodox women is within

the framework of Jewish law, the constitution of our people, not beyond it, what is the issue? If everything that is being asked for can be supported purely and entirely from halachic sources, how can it possibly be heretical?

I won't rehearse here all the halachic arguments that allow women to gather together to pray and to read from the Torah. Rabbis Sperber and Henkin have done it powerfully and brilliantly, and you can find it all on the internet (another great equalizer that is hated by the extreme). It is true that women and men have different degrees of obligations in Torah Judaism. I believe it is right and necessary to distinguish between male and female spaces, so long as legal equality is universal. But that does not mean that those who want to cannot take on more for themselves. None of the women who hold positions in Orthodox synagogues in the USA is campaigning to abandon Jewish law or take on functions that do. Even the so-called "Partnership Minyanim" are still committed to halacha. All they ask is to be able to have services that give women more opportunities to participate actively for themselves. Their only crime is being something new that was never done before. Traditional bodies of all kinds fear change and progress. It is like refusing to abandon the horse and cart in favor of the automobile. It's new. It has not been done before. Welcome the Amish.

Is the issue one title? Everyone knows that "rabbi" is pretty toothless. If there are people who eat pork, break Shabbat, and know less about Torah than a Charedi cheder kid can call themselves rabbis, then what does the title mean, any more than calling someone "sir" or "madam"? If one can set up one's own rabbinical college and award rabbinic degrees, the title is no more than a BA in tiddlywinks. But who cares? We all know you need to look at the degree awarding institution, not just the degree itself. There is a difference, I venture, between a PhD from Harvard as opposed to one from the Florida Methodist University of Waterskiing.

In my yeshivah they looked down on those who abandoned the scholarly life to become a "rabbi" in a congregation. I know Orthodox rabbis who actually bought their title and from very, very Orthodox rabbis in Jerusalem, for that matter. Titles are pretty meaningless in themselves. The great Hillel didn't need any title whatsoever. Most great heads of yeshivahs don't actually have semicha (technical ordination), and most rebbes wouldn't want to be called rabbis to save their lives. I would much prefer to be called Rav than Rabbi. The great late Rav Moshe Feinstein used on occasion to refer to rabbis as "ra bi"—"bad for me"!

If a woman teaches in a community and helps the rabbi with sundry social pastoral tasks, how is she in anyway offending Jewish law, regardless of what name she is given? And if it's the title alone that is the problem, let the Orthodox come up with one that doesn't offend instead of the usual, predictable attack dogs being unleashed and excoriating those of a different point of view.

So it's feminism they worry about? But there are feminists and feminists. Sure there are plenty of crazy, left-wing, looney, politically correct, anti-Zionist, nutcases called feminists. But there are others who merely want seek opportunities to serve.

I find it illogical that the halachic authorities still refuse to deal with the one issue that embarrasses me about Orthodoxy today, that a man can still hold his wife to ransom over a divorce "till death do them part"! Why aren't those busy rabbis dealing with that, you ask (other than with pious motions and fine words)? If the boot were on the other foot, and men were suffering, you bet they would.

I am particularly disappointed that the American RCA has capitulated to the narrower perspective of the Israeli religious powers. But I guess they too are political.

So instead of disregarding the reasonable, moderate requests of women who want to remain within Orthodoxy, who want to study Torah and help people, those pious men should actually try being positive. That, I believe, would be a Kiddush HaShem, make us seem caring and good. Issuing bans on nothing of significance is indeed a Chillull Hashem. It makes us seem both sad and blind. Certainly not "wise in the eyes of the nations" (Deuteronomy 4:6).