

We Should All Be Feminists

JOFA, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, is holding its fifth international conference here this weekend, and while the official theme is "Women and Men In Partnership," the underlying message is that you don't have to be Orthodox, or feminist — or a woman — to help build a more equitable Jewish society.

The fact that such a statement is considered edgy, or controversial, by some is proof that we still have a long way to go in convincing many traditional Jews that feminism is not about women's issues per se but about how we see ourselves, and how we function as a community. In fact, the responsibility is on men to recognize their long overdue role in addressing and helping to solve many of the social problems in our community that have arisen, at least in part, as a result of keeping women the weaker sex in the Jewish tradition.

This year's JOFA conference will deal with attempts not only to effect change in increasing ritual opportunities for women within the boundaries of halacha, but to emphasize the broader social problems that challenge us all. Our community might be a good deal healthier if there were at least as many men as women in attendance at the conference, held every two years, hearing the female perspective on the struggle for more equity in matters ranging from education to legal and rabbinic rulings. Several sessions this year will deal with various forms of abuse — rabbinic as well as spousal, and psychological as well as sexual — that finally are being recognized but still require a great deal more communal attention.

Carol Newman, the president of JOFA, says the group is also seeking to encourage men to



approach issues "emotionally as well as intellectually." She would like to see the custom of being called to the Torah by one's father's name expanded to include one's mother's name as well, or to include a mother's name as well as the father's on a person's tombstone. These innovations appear to be more about sensitivity and recognizing changing social mores than strict religious law.

Many Jewish feminists want to take part in every aspect of religious life unless there is a halachic restriction. That's what bothers some traditionalists. Yet what makes these women different from other feminists is a deep respect for tradition and an ultimate acceptance, rather than rejection, of Jewish law, and the authority of the rabbis. The women's desire for a deeper spiritual and intellectual connection to Judaism overrides the censure of critics who fail to recognize, especially in this age of assimilation, the importance of every Jew fulfilling his or her potential.

But the tension between seeking full, if distinctive, participation for women and abiding by rabbinic rulings is ever present. It's also healthy — if each side comes to understand and appreciate the other as a partner rather than adversary.

Blu Greenberg, a founder of JOFA and of the Jewish feminist movement, says that other feminists have "criticized us for worrying about what the rabbis will say, but that's what distinguishes us. We've never said we'll sever our ties with authority." She said JOFA is seeking a balance, and partnership, "between women and men, and between women and rabbinic authority."

Some JOFA leaders say privately they re-

gret that the word "feminism" is part of the group's acronym. They believe it causes undue friction and misunderstanding, and "besides, we are a post-feminist movement," one officer told me. But Dr. Tova Hartman, an author and lecturer on feminism at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, disagrees. "Some may see 'feminist' as a dirty word, but we should hold onto it because we owe it to those who came before us" — in the religious and secular feminist movements — "and enabled us to reach this point," she said.

Hartman is a founder of Shira Hadasha, an Orthodox-egalitarian congregation in Jerusalem that has grown rapidly in its two years. It maintains a mechitzah for separate seating between the sexes but allows women to lead parts of the Shabbat service, including reading from and being called to the Torah. Hartman will be speaking at the JOFA conference about the congregation, which has spawned several similar, increasingly popular prayer groups in the U.S.

She says the biggest surprise to her about the success of Shira Hadasha (A New Song) is how easily people adjust to change — "as long as it has integrity," she says, "because people are looking for an integrated religious experience."

She stressed that the only way to have a serious discussion about religious roles and change in the community is with the full participation of men. Addressing the issue of agunot — women trapped in marriages by husbands who will not grant them a religious divorce — Hartman said it is important for groups like JOFA

and its Israeli counterpart, Kolech, to continue to champion their cause. Even though the number of cases of agunot may be few in number, she said, they represent "a challenge to the whole system."

Blu Greenberg says there has been progress on the agunah front in finding halachic sources to compel a divorce, in creating public support for the women as victims, and in public censuring of the recalcitrant husbands.

Of course there is a long way to go on that front, and many others, but to their credit, the women of JOFA have not walked away in bitterness from a tradition that has sought to preserve male dominance in social and psychological matters as well as legal ones.

I once heard a rabbi of a traditional service dispel critics of his newly announced, just-completed Shabbat morning practice — to allow a

woman to take the Torah from the cantor and walk with it through the women's section — by saying, "the only remarkable aspect of what just happened is that the women gave the Torah back."

Indeed, what's remarkable about the women of JOFA is that they are motivated less by anger with traditional practice than with love for the tradition itself. That's why, despite controversy and criticism, they care enough to continue the struggle. But until we see ourselves as part of it as well, our community will not be whole. □

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For information on the JOFA conference, visit www.jofa.org.
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