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SHIFTING OUT OF NEUTRAL

Re-Gendering the Liberal Synagogue

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for ordination

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Contents

Chapter 1

"Male and Female God Created Them" But What Happened Next?

The truth is that the Talmud is the collective endeavor not of the entire Jewish people, but only of its male half. Jewish women have been omitted- by purposeful excision- from this "collective endeavor"...from the main stage of Jewish communal achievement...a loss numerically greater than a hundred pogroms: yet Jewish literature and history report not one wail, not one tear.

CYNTHIA OZICK

Judaism is traditionally a patriarchy[1], and within patriarchy, gender is the organizing principle that confers power. In Judaism, particularly since the Talmud was enshrined as the central organizing text of the Jewish lived experience, religious and communal power have been concentrated in the hands of Jewish men. A new paradigm must be formed in favor of a model of real shared power. In order to do so, the source of the power must be uncovered and then rerouted in a positive direction.

As many scholars point out, Jewish patriarchy differs in significant ways from the normative Western model[2]. As Jacob Neusner argues in Androgynous Judaism:

> "The Judaism set forth by rabbinic literature and normative from antiquity to our own time derive entirely from men. They moreover set forth a system that is for all practical purposes dominated by men. But these are men who identify with the virtues they see in women, and who put forth a religious system that means to feminize Israel,

[1]By characterizing Judaism as "patriarchal" I do not mean to invoke theories of pre-biblical women-centered cults that were somehow made over by Abraham etc. in an early time. Though I suppose it might be theoretically possible, I am not advocating that all Jewish women need to do is uncover our "authentic" pre-rabbinic or pre-biblical roles. Rather, by calling Judaism a patriarchal culture, I mean only to say that for centuries official Jewish culture was virtually exclusively in the hands of men, who fashioned its rules, rituals, and meanings and who also controlled all major mechanisms for legal and cultural change.

[2] See Boyarin, D. Carnal Israel; Valler, S. Women and Womanhood; Hauptman, J. Rereading the Rabbis

> endowing the enchanted nation with the virtues that the sages themselves classify as those of women."[3]

Western culture is itself both patriarchal and androcentric, and in history Jews have often occupied the role of the powerless, or feminine, role in the Western power relationship. This was especially true after the Romans put down the final Jewish rebellions around 150 CE. The Talmud developed during this period as a record of the discussion about (and eventually a guide for) communal living and governance in a world of limited Jewish political power. Because of their political reality, power in the rabbinic imagination demanded a different locus—one that could not be determined or affected from outside the community. The safest place to center this power was thus in Torah and Torah-learning, an entirely internal communal discourse. Torah-power was entirely male power.

The normative rabbinic/Talmudic understanding of masculine and feminine gender roles, especially in regard to Torah learning and the power this led to. A vast amount of literature has been generated on this topic in the last thirty years. Reading many of these works has convinced me that gender and sexuality were complicated issues even for the ancients, and several scholars have obfuscated these issues in gloriously nuanced ways. As Miriam Peskowitz points out, it is dangerous to assume that ideas about gender or sexuality are monolithic at any given time[4]. Multiple understandings circulate simultaneously, influenced by geography, politics, class,

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[3] Neusner, J. Androgynous Judaism viii
[4] Peskowitz, Miriam Spinning Fantasies 9

communal traditions, and history. Even Peskowitz agrees however, that certain understandings are privileged over others. Such understandings would have more influence, greater staying power, and the ability to exert pressure towards conformity.

For the purposes of this paper, I am not particularly interested in the nuances of the Talmudic debate about gender. I am comfortable painting the picture of rabbinic understandings of gender with fairly broad strokes because, in this instance, I am not concerned with the ancient experience of gender. Rather, what I seek to explore is the power our later assumptions about rabbinic categories continue to exert over living Jewish communities, and particularly that of liberal Jews in the United States[5].

What is the vision of gender that the rabbis privileged over other competing views, and how can we use this privileged understanding as a jumping off place to examine more contemporary issues? The problem with working with early rabbinic documents, and the Talmud in particular, is that for many hundreds of years, Jews assumed the Talmud was a reliable history book, rather than what more recent scholarship demonstrates—a document depicting what the rabbis wished the world was like. As Judith Hauptman characterizes the problem, when studying rabbinic texts, modern "historians cannot presume that all or even most people followed the law. Similarly, Talmudists cannot assume that socio-historical realities are accurately

[5] As this is the first of many uses of the term "liberal" American Jews, I need to clarify what I mean by it. This is a definition of my own invention, but one I feel is both logical and acceptable for lay- and scholarly use. By liberal Jew I mean to imply nothing about political preferences, but rather those Jews living in North America who identify by formal affiliation or affinity with the Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Renewal movements, in short, the spectrum of religiously identified non-Orthodox American Jews. According to the 1990 and 2000 Jewish Population Surveys, this group represents the overwhelming majority of active American Jews.

reflected in the law"[6] This earlier faith in the Talmud's historical veracity, however, led Jews by the early Middle Ages to assume the Talmud was a blueprint not only for what the Jewish world had been like, but also what it should be like in the future. The living Jewish communities of the day were thus modeled on a false sense of the lived Jewish past, or, to borrow Hauptman's words again, "The rabbis' literary and legal legacy rests as the foundation of Judaism as it is practiced today."[7]

Baskin argues that to some degree, the "rabbinic separation of women from arenas of endeavor constituted as male was a deliberate choice, since this was not the only Jewish communal model available, at least for those who lived within the boundaries of the Roman empire"[8] She argues that the rabbis established a pattern of deliberately removing women from functions in the public domain which they enjoyed during biblical and Second Temple times. The rabbinic gender roles which were viewed as sacrosanct by later generations were not as universal in the rabbi's own day as the Talmud would have us believe.

Bernadette Brooten, using Greek and Latin inscriptions from Phoenicia, Egypt, Italy and Turkey which endow women with tiles such as "head of the synagogue", "leader", "mother of the synagogue", "Priestess", and "elder", argues the Jewish women were sometimes leaders in precisely the sphere the rabbis were so intent on excluding them from—the ancient synagogue.[9] Ross Shepard Kraemer argues further

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[6] Hauptman, J. Rereading the Rabbis 6
[7] Ibid. 3
[8] Baskin, J. Midrashic Women 41
[9] Brooten, B. Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue

that the rabbinic effort to eliminate women from the public domain may have been a direct response to the actual power and prestige of women in Jewish communities, and that the intensity of that rabbinic response may be in direct proportion to the degree of public influence some women enjoyed.[10] Baskin encapsulates the implications of this theory when she says: "that in their desire to eliminate women from sphere of communal authority, the rabbis were not simply sanctifying accepted traditions and norms of life but construction a congenial reality of their own. Their vision of an ideal society, believed to conform to the divine will, compelled them to reject deliberately a number of features of the wider Jewish and gentile worlds around them, including traditions of female legal autonomy, women's religious rituals, and females communal leadership, because of the dangers they perceived to be connected with such options."[11]

To illustrate this problem, Mordechai Freidman's work on Palestinian ketubot found in the Cairo Geniza demonstrates, based on the evidence of eighty ketubot, there was a demonstrated tradition of women initiating proceedings towards obtaining a get (rabbinic divorce) in the Palestinian tradition. The Babylonian Talmud, which became the definitive text for later Jewish communities, appears to be oblivious to this Palestinian tradition, assuming that women may not initiate proceedings towards a get. With no allusion to the older, more permissive attitude, it is the Bavli's restrictive approach which becomes enshrined in later halacha on divorce.

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[10] Shepard-Kraemer, R. Her Share of the Blessings
[11] Baskin, J. 42

As a further example of the dissonance between actual ancient practice and later halacha, in her work, Engendering Judaism, in addition to the Freidman reference, Rachel Adler cites the example of "Babata's Ketuba"[12]. This contract, found in a cave in the Judean desert and contemporary with the Mishna (c. 200 CE), includes a stipulation that enabled both parties to initiate divorce proceedings. As Adler pointedly remarks (italics hers), "These ketubot reveal an astonishing fact: *a tradition that endured more than a thousand years offered Jewish women a right Orthodox women do not have today.*"[13]

With this problem of historical inconsistency and rabbinic imagination in mind, Judith Baskin grounds the philosophical foundation best:

> "Although the particulars of rabbinic writings reveal very little about the actualities of Jewish activities in any particular era or locale, in the course of the middle ages mandates of the Babylonian Talmud became normative for virtually all Jewish communities. Thus the models of the relation between male and female, as between the divine and the human, which were imagined but not necessarily lived in every detail by a few groups of particularly pious male sages, ultimately became the central authority and practical pattern of almost a millennium and a half of Jewish existence, with enduring consequences for Jewish women as well as Jewish men."[14]

Part of the Talmud's power for modern Jews is that it takes a text whose influence and authority were not felt by most Jews until much later and refracts Jewish history through this lens, thereby creating the perception of religious unity where perhaps none existed[15]. Rabbinic power, from the medieval period onward, roots itself in Talmudic authority, which is paradoxically authority the Mishnaic and Talmudic rabbis likely did not enjoy in their own time. Because of this unique role in

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[12] Adler, Rachel. Engendering Judaism 178
[13] Ibid. 179
[14] Baskin, J. 4
[15] Peskowitz, M. 15

Jewish thought, examining the Talmud tells us where the power in Jewish communal life has been. I want to know where it might go.

Some of the most cutting-edge work in gender and queer theory encourages us to look beyond the male/female binary, even pushing the idea of a gender-spectrum to its outer limits. Jacob Neusner argues that:

> "The dual Torah is a masculine formation of an androgynous religious structure and system. Androgyneity is serial: now feminine, in the end of days, masculine. God wants holy Israel now to embody traits defined as feminism, woman to the nations' ravishing man, so that, in the world that is coming, Israel may find itself transformed into man—but man still with woman's virtues."[16]

E. Kukla's 2006 rabbinic thesis argues cogently by accounting for the *tumtum* (hermaphrodite) and *androgynos* that the rabbis of the Talmud were capable of thinking beyond the typical two-gender system: that people could exist beyond and in-between. I do not dispute these conclusions, but neither do I particularly want to engage with them. Most people experience their own socially and biologically constructed gender along the male-female spectrum. For the purposes of this paper, it is this majority I chose to concentrate on. Beyond the issues of personal identity, Peskowitz argues, "Gender and sexuality are not just appropriate (or inappropriate) roles and social performances. They form categories, divisions that are given social meaning and import. They serve as marks of difference."[17] The implications of these perceived differences follow.

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[16] Neusner, J. vii
[17] Peskowitz, M. 7

Talmudic Men and the Boundaries of Their Masculinity

In rural England, there was a long-standing annual tradition known as "beating the bounds". Fathers would take their sons to walk the edges of the family property, beating them at the borders so that the son would never forget the precise boundaries of his land. While this seems like a very "un-Jewish" ritual, the psychic inplications of the rabbinic discourse on masculinity feel similar. In order to understand how the rabbis viewed women, we must first examine how they constructed their own identity as men, and how these ideas of masculinity were transmitted and reinforced among later generations. This is a particularly complicated endeavor as the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods were characterized by profound changes in the status of Jewish men as Jewish national status shifted from relative independence as a suzerain nation within the Roman empire to enslavement and permanent diaspora after the destruction of Judea in 70 CE and the final dissolution of the Sanhedrin in 425 CE.

In order to define rabbinic masculinity, first we must acknowledge that no culture exists in a vacuum, and Jewish culture, even during periods of independence and political or military domination, has always developed to a substantial degree in response to surrounding contemporary cultures. Thus the process of identity formation from within the rabbinic community, regardless of political status, was profoundly influenced by the dominant Greek and Roman understanding of gender, where, described by Bernadette Brooten:

> "Active and passive constitute foundational categories for Roman-period culture; they are gender coded as masculine and feminine respectively. In their presentations of a wide range of sexual behaviors and orientations, astrologers often categorized an active sexual role as masculine and a passive sexual role as feminine."[18]

Following Alexander the Great's conquest of the Middle East in the early fourth century B.C.E., the influence of Greek/Hellenistic culture became increasingly powerful in the region. Some scholars see the Hellenistic view of women as lesser beings as a primary influence on contemporary rabbinic views. Tikvah Frymer-Kensky is a proponent of this view, arguing that Greek thought significantly influenced post-biblical Judaism. She sees the rabbinic conception of women and sex as a profound departure from the literature of the Hebrew Bible, arguing, "in place of the Bible's portrayal of women and men as fundamentally similar, the rabbis express a gender-polarized view of humanity." In her opinion, the Bible does not address the issue of human sexuality, and in the absence of a position on the issue, Greek concepts of sex and gender which are "decidedly antiwoman and anticarnal" fill the resulting vacuum. She suggests that the rabbinic conceptions of woman as radical Other, rabbinic expressions of misogyny, and rabbinic fear of the disruptive potential of erotic desire are directly borrowed from Greek civilization.[19]

As Judith Wegner describes the interplay between Greek and Rabbinic thought about the essential nature of men and women,

> "The conception of woman as an incomplete creature (specifically an imperfect man) was widespread in Greek culture. This Aristotelian view of women's biological nature prevailed throughout the Hellenistic world well before the Mishnaic period. The first-

[18] Brooten, B. *Early Christians* cited in Boyarin *Unheroic Conduct* 5
[19] Frymer-Kensky, T. In the Wake of the Goddesses 203

> century exponent of Hellenistic-Judaic thought, Philo of Alexandria, repeatedly describes the female as physically, intellectually, and morally inferior to the male. Philo's denigration of women seems to have been shaped at least as much by his Hellenistic background as by his interpretation of Jewish scripture. Indeed, the notion of female incompleteness appears in all Western systems influenced by Greek philosophy. We find clear evidence of it in the Mishna; the sages, endorsing Scripture's denial of women's right to appear "before Adonai", explicitly classified women with other imperfect beings—such a blemished members of the priesthood, deaf-mutes, imbeciles, minors, androgynes, slaves, the lame, the blind, the sick, and the aged—who were likewise disqualified. The notion of female imperfection or incompleteness, then, may lie at the root of female otherness as perceived by the Mishnaic male."[20]

To add another layer of cultural complexity, Baskin posits that, though Greek philosophy was undoubtedly influential, the prevalence of anti-women attitudes in Jewish communities throughout the region, including areas like Babylonia (which had its own home-grown misogynistic traditions), where Hellenistic influence was less pronounced, indicates that "highly negative views towards women and their physicality, together with ambivalence and anxiety about female sexuality and fidelity, were endemic throughout the ancient world in Middle Eastern, Mesopotamian, and Greco-Roman cultural settings" and that "while the theme of woman as dangerous temptress may be muted in biblical writings, it is certainly not absent"[21]

Daniel Boyarin, in his work *Carnal Israel*, attempts to create a middle ground that redeems the Talmudic rabbis vis-à-vis women. He does not dispute that there are highly unpleasant misogynistic attitudes enshrined in rabbinic literature, but he maintains that rabbinic tradition as a whole does not see women as essentially impure and contaminating, and where it appears to, such writing is due to Greek and not

[20] Wegner, J. Chattel or Person? 193
[21] Baskin, J. 36

biblical influence. He disputes the theory that fear of female sexuality was a major force in the creation of rabbinic patriarchy. To account for the misogyny found in the Jewish cultures that emerged after the codification of the Talmud, he argues that while fear of women's sexuality is present in the Talmud, it was only "from the early Middle Ages on that they became well entrenched in rabbinic culture and official religion, paralleled exactly by similar changes in the discourse of menstruation from cultic disability to near-demonic contamination."[22] It is this transformation from text to lived Jewish experience that concerns modern liberal Jews.

Judith Wegner takes a largely constructivist approach to the analysis of the rabbinic understanding of gender. She argues that:

> "The Mishna, a book of legal rules compiled by Jewish sages in second-century Roman Palestine, depicts a society whose central character is the free adult Israelite male. Possessor of wives, children, land, slaves, livestock, and other chattels, he occupies a sociological status not unlike that of the Roman paterfamilias, his counterpart in the dominant culture of the day. The Mishna's socioeconomic system, rooted in private property, considers people and things from the perspective of their relationship to the owner or master."[23]

From this perspective, male is normative and female slightly deviant. Men are actors, while women are largely acted upon. This attitude is pervasive throughout the rabbinic articulation of masculinity.

As part of a discussion of the various ritual obligations incumbent on the adult male Jew Tractate B. Menahot 43b states:

> It was taught: R. Judah used to say, A man is bound to say the following three blessings daily: "(Blessed are you) who has not made me a gentile", "who has not made me a woman", and "who has not made me a brutish man". R. Aha ben Jacob once overheard his son saying, "(Blessed

[22] Boyarin, Daniel. Carnal Israel 96
[23] Wegner, J. 4

> are you...) who has not made me a brutish man" whereupon (struck by the arrogance of the statement since brutish men are also obligated by the commandments) he said to him, "And this too?" Said the other, "Then what blessing should I say instead?" (He replied) "...who has not made me a slave." (Objectors asked) and isn't that the same as a women (since a woman and a slave are of the same status regarding performance of commandments? (It was answered) A slave is more contemptible.

In a practical sense, what made a Jew a Jew by the rabbinic period beyond the ceremony of *brit milah* was participation in the central institutions of rabbinic communal life: the Beit Kenesset (house of worship) and Beit Midrash (house of study). Within their walls individuals exercised the primary obligations of rabbinic Jews: daily communal prayer, the discussion and maintenance of the system of mitzvoth, and the study of Torah (later especially Talmud). The essence of rabbinic masculinity, formulated in response to political disenfranchisement, was predicated on the recasting of power in terms of knowledge. Manhood was then measured in terms of commitment to and achievement in learning Torah. There was also a class bias against the am ha-aretz, the ignorant farmer or shepherd who did not have the leisure for Torah study and was not situated near the urban centers where Torah study flourished. Torah became not only a man's work, but also the most important work in society, the work necessary for Jewish survival. With the exception of a few legendary women like the much-lauded but complicated wife of Rabbi Meir, Bruriah, a masculine intellectual elite monopolized the study and teaching of Torah and the construction and application of halacha.

As Rachel Adler argues in Engendering Judaism, the Beit Midrash was not only a world without women, it was also conceptualized as dis-embodied space even for

men[24]. It was intended as a world of mind and spirit: more than a physical space, it was a state of mind. Adler applies Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick's definition of a "homosocial environment-- a world whose social economy is given over to the service of masculine emotional sustenance, where the masculine psyche and its imaginings are the coin of the realm, indeed, the only legal tender" to the rabbinic Beit Midrash. According to Adler,

> "The substructure that holds this homosocial world together is a magnetic framework of opposed dominations and dependencies. Elements of this substructure surface in rabbinic fantasy, charged with forbidden fears and desires. On the one hand, dependency is the patriarch's nightmare. The slave or the woman can be viewed as the mirror in which the dominator sees his own repressed and rejected dependency. Yet in certain midrashic narratives, recognition from the feminine other is the powerful catalyst that urges the masculine self towards its apotheosis of self-actualization."[25]

The maintenance of the legitimacy of Torah-centered masculinity was predicated on the perception that study and the public performance of ritual were male only activities. In his work on Jewish masculinity, Unheroic Conduct, Daniel Boyarin argues that the subordinate and marginalized position of Jews after 70 CE led rabbinic culture to privilege gentle, passive, and emotional men, in short, the *mensch* over the *goy*. Because the dominant non-Jewish culture understood these attributes, as well as the central activity of rabbinic masculinity—Torah study—as essentially female, in order to validate their masculinity to themselves, Jewish men had to subordinate Jewish women and keep them from the privileged spheres of worship and study.[26] Because of the internalized ambivalence of this gender confusion, Jewish

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[24] Adler, R. 6
[25] Ibid. 7
[26] Boyarin, Daniel Unheroic Conduct 156-157

men felt the need to limit Jewish women to the necessary but lower status of family caretakers and economic entrepreneurs.[27]

Boyarin sees no negative intent here, but rather simply a sociological phenomenon. The exclusion of women from the key performative aspects of Judaism was not meant to keep them in ignorance, nor was a it product of the perceived power of female contamination, but rather "it was purely and simply a means for the maintenance of a male power-structure via the symbolic exclusion of women from the single practice most valued in the culture, the study of Talmud."[28] Regardless of intent, however, the outcome is the same—separating women from Torah study produced the resulting ideology of "women as contaminated and contaminating, which men have disseminated and women internalized".[29]

Mayer Gruber finds within the use of femaleness as a metaphor for Jewish masculinity the rationale for excluding actual Jewish women from the central activities of Judaism. He understands the failures of the First and Second Revolts of 66-70 C.E. and 132-135 C.E. to have politically emasculated Jewish men in Roman Palestine at the pivotal moment when the basis of the foundational text of future Judaism was being established. This political impotence would continue throughout late antiquity wherever Jews lived. In concert with earlier arguments by Jacob Neusner about the self-feminization of Israel during this period, Gruber argues:

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[27] Boyarin, D. Unheroic Conduct 144-145
[28] Ibid. 179
[29] Ibid. 153

> "Jewish men sought and found in the study of Torah, the Rabbinic courts of law, which had jurisdiction over marriage and divorce and petty economic transactions, a new arena to assert their manliness, which is to say their power to influence the world...it is no wonder that they sought to banish women from these few areas in which, under the Roman-Byzantine and Parthian, and Sassanian yoke, they could feel like powerful men rather than powerless little boys."[30]

As evidence of the long-term success of this strategy, in her studies of early modern Eastern European Jewish writings, Chava Weissler comments that, based on the values received (or thought to be received) from Talmudic culture, in later Jewish communities ignorant men were characterized as being "like women"[31]

Because of external pressure saying that the studious Jewish man was feminine, it became all the more important to maintain the boundaries between men and women within the privileged areas of Jewish culture. In B. Shabbat 62a, Ulla (not a very woman-friendly guy) states baldly, "Women are a separate people", and the weight of the rabbis' explicit gender discussion makes it clear which side of the dividing line you wanted to be on. Another layer of complexity is added to the rabbinic imagining of masculinity when the degree to which the rabbis co-opted the role of women in reference to themselves, and by extension, to all Jewish men, is examined.

At the Heart of the Matter – Do Women Have A Brit?

In terms of both theology and identity, what makes Jews unique is our relationship with God as part of a covenantal community. From its first articulation in

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[30] Gruber, Mayer *"The Status of Women in Ancient Judaism"* 172
[31] Chava Weissler, *"For Women and For Men Who Are Like Women"* 7

Genesis 17, it is clear that Jewish men and women experience this covenant differently:

> God further said to Abraham, "As for you, you and your offspring to come throughout the ages shall keep my covenant. Such shall be the covenant between Me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised, home born and purchased alike. Thus shall my covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact.[32]

Women are not explicitly mentioned, though one presumes they are included under the general category of "offspring". The sign of the covenant which eternally re-establishes Judaism for both the individual and the community is circumcision. As Larry Hoffman argues in his seminal work Covenant of Blood, circumcision has been the sine qua non of Jewish identity throughout time. Through the rite of circumcision, the rabbis made Judaism inseparable from the male lifeline[33]. Circumcision stood at the center of the rabbinic universe, in proof of which Hoffman cites Mishna Nedarim 3:11 (his translation):

> "The word 'uncircumcised' is used only as a name for Gentiles...Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria says, 'The foreskin is disgusting, for the word is used in order to refer disparagingly to pagans...' Rabbi Ishmael says, 'Great is circumcision, since it overrides the prohibition of the Sabbath (meaning that circumcision is performed on the eighth day of a boy's life even if that day is the Sabbath).' Rabbi Joshua ben Korchah says, 'Great is circumcision for it was not suspended even for a moment for the sake of Moses the righteous (a reference to the 'bridegroom of blood' narrative, Exodus 4:25)'...Rabbi (Judah HaNasi) says, ' great is circumcision for despite all the commandments that our father Abraham carried out, he was called complete (shalem) only with his circumcision...' Another opinion holds, 'Great is circumcision, for if it were not for that, the Holy One Blessed be He would not have created this world."[34]

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[32] Genesis 17:9-14
[33] Hoffman, L. Covenant of Blood 25
[34] Ibid. 10-11

As Hoffman sees the issue, the rabbis "identify Jewish culture in its fullness only with men's concerns, men's growth, men's maturity. Women exist officially only insofar as they enter the orbit of men."[35] Or, as Shaye Cohen suggests,

> "Jewish women were not Jews in the way Jewish men were Jews: "The normal Jew for the rabbis, and the "normal" Israelite of the Torah, was the free adult male. The exclusion of women from circumcision typifies their exclusion from the observance of numerous commandments...A woman's place is to facilitate acts of piety of by menfolk, acts of piety from which she herself is excluded. Therefore it should occasion no surprise if only men are marked by circumcision—only men are really Jews in all respects."[36]

In agreement with Boyarin's argument in Carnal Israel about rabbinic Judaism as a culture of the body, on the issue of circumcision and covenant, Hoffman takes the argument further, stating:

> "Precisely because rabbinic Judaism was a religion of the body, men's and women's bodies became signifiers of what the Rabbis accepted as gender essence, especially with regard to the binary opposition of men's blood drawn during circumcision and women's blood that flows during menstruation. Gender opposition remains absolutely central in my reading of rabbinic texts."[37]

In Hoffman's prescient analysis, male blood, especially from circumcision, is sanctifying, while women's blood, especially from menstruation, is polluting. As Baskin characterizes the blood dichotomy:

> Menstruation is not seen as a positive part of women's natural cycle of fertility. In the rabbinic imagination, menstruation indicates a failure of fertility. Unlike the blood of circumcision, which is linked with fecundity, menstrual blood is connected to defilement, estrangement from God, and death.[38]

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[35] Hoffman, L. 25
[36] Cohen, Shaye J.D. "Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? In *Gender and the Body in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Maria Wykes (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) p.148
[37] Hoffman, L. 23
[38] Eilberg-Schwartz, H. The Savage in Judaism, 184-185

It follows that, by virtue of certain physiological realities, the Abrahamic covenant is a first-person active experience for men and a passive association for women. From what might be seen as the first Jewish moment, men communicate directly with God and the cosmos while women experience that relationship only vicariously, if at all, through their subordinate relationship to their husbands (or fathers).[39] We see this dichotomy today as contemporary Jews struggle to develop covenantal rituals to celebrate the birth of Jewish girls. Despite much ritual and liturgical creativity, none of these *brit bat* ceremonies match the emotional power of *brit milah*. From birth, Jewish men are real Jews, while women are Jews by association.

This gender-differentiated experience continues throughout the process of attaining Jewish maturity. In B. Kiddushin 29a the Talmud identifies three commandments in the Torah delineating obligations parents owe their children: a father must redeem his son[40], circumcise him[41], and teach him the commandments[42]. O. Larry Yarborough feels Proverbs 6:20, "My son, keep your father's commandment and do not forsake your mother's teaching" provides some evidence for mothers having a role in the education of children, but the overwhelming weight of the contemporary rabbinic discussion on the issue focused on the obligation of a father (or his male surrogate) to ensure a Jewish education for his son(s).

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[39] Baskin, J. 16
[40] Exodus 22:29
[41] Leviticus 12:1-8
[42] Deuteronomy 4:9, 6:7, and 31:12-13

Yarborough also posits logically that instruction for children began in the home[43]. The Mishna mentions instruction as part of home-based holiday observance, as at the seder when a son asks four questions, beginning with "why is this night different from all other nights?" It is "according to the understanding of the son his father instructs him"[44]. Similar instructions are given for the observance of Yom Kippur[45], where a father is instructed to introduce his children to the ritual fast even before they are technically obligated to observe it. With this kind of family oriented learning, there is no reason to assume that girls were not included, at least by association. Young women spent most of their lives in the home, and whatever education they received took place there. Mothers were responsible for instructing their daughters in the observance of the laws and customs of niddah. But for significant rituals like the seder, though women were included, it is clear the explicit teaching was oriented towards boys. It is no accident that, until challenged by modern feminist sensibilities, the four children, representing four learners (wise, wicked, simple, and unable to ask) were always depicted in both literature and art as four sons.

Once learning moves outside of the home, it is clear that the world of the teacher and students is an overwhelmingly masculine one. A father was responsible for providing for his son's education, though not teaching him himself[46]. Learning

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[43] Yarborough, O. *"Parents and Children in the Jewish Family of Antiquity"* 42
[44] Mishna Pesach 10:4
[45] Mishna Yoma 8:4
[46] B. Kiddushin 32b

outside the home or with a tutor might begin with instruction in the Mishna to boys as young as five or six years. The mandate for universal elementary education for boys dates to around 64 CE when Rabbi Joshua ben Gamla decreed that teachers be appointed in every district and city, and that all boys be enrolled in their schools regardless of social or economic status.[47]

Rabbis and Their Female Problems

The rabbis were not oblivious to the fact that rabbinic Judaism would not survive very long if it excluded women entirely. With the rabbinic affection for clear categories and women's persistence in being difficult to categorize, the rabbis might be said to have "female problems". As Judith Wegner illuminates brilliantly in her work Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishna, certain kinds of women fit neatly into the rabbinic system. These girls and women, particularly married women living under their husband's authority and pre-pubescent and virginal young women in their father's homes and under their control, "belonged to" and were the responsibility of these male relatives. With their sexuality "under control", these women were not a threat to the rabbinic system. Some women—widows, divorcees, and older unmarried girls—could not be so clearly categorized or controlled, and so were quite threatening to the social system as envisioned by the rabbis. To limit this danger, Jewish communities went to great lengths to insure there were as few uncontrolled women running around as possible.

[47] Cantor, A. Jewish Women/Jewish Men 95

With this social good in mind, marriage was a central value in the rabbinic system, one of the five things (including an education) a father was responsible for providing for his son. In his book Jewish Marriage in Antiquity, Michael Satlow presents a cogent argument for marriage as central to the rabbinic conception of a life lived in concert with the commandments. Though the ultimate goal of marriage in the rabbinic mind was procreation, it is clear from the discussion in B. Yevamot 61b that children were not the only reason for marriage.

> "But if he has children, he may abstain from procreation, but he may not abstain from having a wife. It is a help to Rav Nachman who said in the name of Shmuel, "Even if a man has several children, he is forbidden to live without a wife, as it is said, 'it is not good for man to be alone' (Genesis 2:18) But some say that if he has children, he may abstain from procreation and from having a wife. You could say this is an objection to the saying of Rav Nachman in the name of Shmuel! No. If he has no children he marries a woman capable of bearing children. But if he has children, he can marry a woman not capable of bearing children. What is the practical difference? That he may sell a Torah scroll (in order to contract a marriage only) in order (to marry a woman capable of bearing) children."

Marriage for the purpose of procreation is of highest value—even the most sacred objects may be sold to enable its fruition. Marriage without the possibility of issue is only slightly less important. In the rabbinic mind, marriage itself is the primary obligation.[48] Later in the same sugya the benefits of a wife are enumerated:

> "Rabbi Tanchum ben Hanilai said, 'Any man who lives without a wife lives without happiness, without blessing, and without good'. 'Without happiness,' as it is written, 'And you shall rejoice with your household' (Deut. 14:26). 'Without blessing' as it is written, 'That a blessings may rest upon your home' (Ezekiel 44:30). 'Without good' as it is written, 'it is not good for man to be alone' (Genesis 2:18). In the west (Palestine) they say, 'Without a help, without wisdom, without Torah, without a wall, without a dwelling'. 'Without a help', as it is written, 'I will make a fitting helper for him' (Genesis 2:18). 'Without wisdom' as it is written, 'Truly I cannot help myself; I have been deprived of resourcefulness' (Job 6:13). 'Without a wall', as it is written 'a woman encircles a man' (Jeremiah 31:21). "Without a dwelling', as it is written, 'You will know that all is well in your tent; when you visit your home you will never fail' (Job 5:24)."

[48] Satlow, M. Jewish Marriage in Antiquity 4

The proof texts here establish a connection between the taking of a wife and the establishment of a household. The stability of family and household is foundational to the rabbinic vision of Jewish life. It is logical that in a world fraught with constant political upheaval the rabbis would turn to the smallest unit of social cohesion, the family, as the key to continuity and stability. Satlow also makes a connection between the rabbis' emphasis on the importance of establishing a household and contemporary Greek and Roman anxiety about the breakdown of the *oikos* (household).

Hesiod, around 700 BCE argues for the centrality of the *oikos* in the social fabric: "First a house, a wife, and an ox for plowing"[49], while later writers regard the *oikos* as the basic institution for reproduction, production, consumption, and the primary unit a collection of which created larger and more complex political institutions. Though such an arrangement would be of benefit to society as a whole, Satlow cites a fragment from the Cairo Geniza, clearly rooted in the above sugya, which makes it clear these values were at the very least articulated, if not conceptualized altogether, in terms of their benefit to men:

> "There are twelve good measures in the world, and any many who does not have a wife in his house who is good in (her) deeds is prevented from (enjoying) all of them. He dwells without good, without happiness, without blessing, without peace, without a help, without atonement, without a wall, without Torah, without life, without satisfaction, without wealth, without a crown"

The sugya from Yevamot continues its discussion of marriage, but with the introduction of comments from Rav Eleazar, a third generation Palestinian amora,

[49] Hesiod, *Works and Days* 405, cited in Michael Satlow's Jewish Marriage in Antiquity 12

make the further point of linking a Jewish man's masculinity to the presence and behavior of a wife:

> "Every man without a wife is not a man, as it is said, 'When God created man, HE made him in the likeness of God: male and female He created them...and called them Man (Genesis 5:1-2). And R. Eleazar said, "Every man who does not have land is not a man, as it is said, 'The heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth he gave over to man' (Psalm 115:16). And R. Eleazar said, 'Why is it written, 'I will make a fitting helper for him' (Genesis 2:18)? If he merits, she will help him, but if he does not merit, (she will be) against him. And some say: R. Eleazar objected, "it is written 'against him' (k'negdo) but we read 'for him'—if he merits, she is for him, but if he does not merit, she opposes him." Rabbi Yosi found Elijah and said to him, "it is written, 'I will make for him a helper'—how does a wife help a man?" He said to him, "A man brings wheat—is the wheat ground? (A man brings) flax—can he wear flax? When she is present, she causes his eyes to shine, and causes him to stand on his feet." And R. Eleazar said, "Why is it written, 'This one at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh' (Genesis 2:23)? It teaches that Adam had intercourse with every beast and living creature and his mind was not cooled until he had intercourse with Eve."

Needless to say, the parallel for female experimentation is nowhere to be found in the rabbinic imagination.

Conflict Between Competing Values: Marriage vs. Torah

It is clear that marriage was a "good" in rabbinic society. For the rabbis, however, its value existed beyond merely reproduction and social stability. The ideal rabbinic wife existed to facilitate her husband's Torah learning, a sphere from which she was essentially barred. As the following stories from B. Ketubot 62b-63a make clear, the ideal wife would enable her husband's Torah study to the point of self-abnegation. The paradigmatic wife was that of Rabbi Akiba:

> "Rabbi Akiba was a shepherd of Ben Kalba Savua. When his daughter saw how modest and noble he was, she said to him, "if I were betrothed to you, would you go to the House of Study?" "Yes," he said to her. She was betrothed to him secretly and she sent him away. Her father found out, and expelled her form his home and vowed that she would not have any benefit of his property. Rabbi Akiba stayed for twelve years in the House of Study. When he returned he brought with him 12,000 students. He heard an old man say to his wife, "For how long will you stay a living widow?" She said to him, "If he would listen to me, he would spend

another twelve years (at the House of Study). Rabbi Akiba said, "With her permission I am doing this", and he returned and spent another twelve years at the house of study. When he returned, he brought with him 24,000 students. When his wife heard, she went out toward him. Her neighbors said, "Borrow nice clothes and put them on." She said to them, "A righteous man knows the needs of his beast (Proverbs 12:10). When she got to him, she fell on her face and kissed his knees. His students thrust her away, but Rabbi Akiba heard her and said to them, "Leave her. What is mine and what is yours is hers."

Daniel Boyarin points to this story as evidence for the profound social contradiction of rabbinic culture. One the one hand, the highest achievement for a man was to devote himself to Torah learning, while on the other hand, the obligation to marry and procreate was universal and fairly absolute. He argues that, "the Palestinians[50] resolved this tension by following a common Hellenistic practice of marrying late after an extended period devoted to "philosophy"—for the Jews, Torah. The Babylonians, on the other hand, having a strong cultural model of the necessity of sexual activity for post-pubescent men, were prevented from such a pattern. They produced at some point, therefore, the impossible "solution" of men marrying young and leaving their wives for extended periods of study, creating, as it were, a class of "married monks"[51]

Satlow further cements the androcentric nature of the rabbinic discussion of marriage by underlining that the debate about marriage is entirely one of the tension between a man's married life and his study of Torah. The rabbis are intent on persuading men that it is in their best interests to marry, but nowhere is there any question of whether or not women should marry.[52] He argues that it would not have

[50] Rabbinic Jews living in Palestine during the Mishnaic period
[51] Boyarin, D. Carnal Israel 165
[52] Satlow, M. 38

occurred to the rabbis, or their Greek and Roman contemporaries, that their women would need to be persuaded. As the Tosefta makes clear, "a woman wants to marry more than a man, and further, the shame of a woman (in being unmarried) is greater than that of a man."[53]

According to Deuteronomy 31:12, men, women, and young children (presumably of both genders) were commanded to assemble to hear the entire Torah read. Regarding this verse, Eleazar ben Azaria comments "that men came to learn, and women to hear"[54]

Rabbis and the Second Sex

For all of the complexities in the formation of Jewish male identity, Judaism is fundamentally a patriarchal culture. And if it is not clear by now, Judith Baskin reminds us, "to study women in rabbinic literature is actually to study men. Since women's voices and actions are reflected only through the mediation of male constructions of their views and behavior, this book (the Talmud) reveals more about men's assumptions and anxieties than actual female concerns."[55] In the rabbinic imagination, "Women are a created entity essentially unlike men in physical form, in innate capacities, and in social and religious significance. These biological,

[53] Tosefta Ketubot 12:3
[54] Tosefta Sotah 7:9
[55] Baskin, J. 11

intellectual, and spiritual differences are understood to be inherent in a women's very essence; they are a consequence of how God made her." [56]

Women were of course not without function in the rabbinic imagination. Though their status was lower than that of men, "to devalue women in comparison with men is not to devalue them altogether. Rabbinic literature affirms that individual women, who are indispensable to reproduction and are required to provide essential family support services, were not only necessary for the smooth functioning of everyday life in the present and for Jewish continuity in the future, but could also be cherished beings who were loved and protected by specific men. Indeed, as long as women satisfied their essential domestic expectations, they were revered and honored for enhancing the lives of their families, and particularly for enabling male relatives to fulfill their religious obligations of prayer and study."[57] Acceptable roles for women were almost exclusively understood in relationship to men— as mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters.

For the rabbis, the ultimate proof text for their perception of the divine ordination of this state of affairs was the creation of Eve in Genesis 2:23: "Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called woman (*isha*), for from man was she taken" and especially her naming in Genesis 3:20 "The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all the living". Woman is thus from creation subordinate to man, while her identity is inextricably bound up in her reproductive

[56] Baskin, J. 12
[57] Ibid.17

function and familial relationships. Yet, it is important to keep in mind that, while in the rabbinic imagination, woman as "other" automatically occupies a different category from man, nonetheless, the sages do perceive woman as a human being, a creature similar to man in important ways. For example, the murderer of a woman is liable to the capital penalty just like the murderer of a man. Hence, according to Wegner, she is both "like" and "not like" man."[58]

Because of this ambivalence, there are inconsistencies in the rabbi's treatment of women. Here again Wegner's insight:

> "On the one hand, the sages perceive women as sentient, intelligent beings whose reactions to real-life situations resemble those of men. On the other hand, they view women through the androcentric lens of a male-dominated culture, which sometimes turns women into objects rather than subjects of the law, makes her peripheral rather than central to the culture, and subordinates her to male jurisdiction—above all in those aspects of the female that hold most value for men. The Mishna maintains strict control of women's activities, especially their sexual and reproductive role in the social economy."[59]

The rabbis were clearly most comfortable with a world in which women remained in the domestic realm under the authority of a male relative. Unaccompanied women who ventured beyond that realm were accused of immodesty and licentiousness, and the rabbis seemed particularly spooked when women congregated publicly. Within this context, Wegner outlines four themes explaining why women were precluded from participation in the sacrificial cult, and by extension, its successor, the synagogue:

> "First, a legal presumption that men, as heads of household, perform cultic precepts on behalf of wives, children, slaves, an all within their jurisdiction; second, a tacit

[58] Wegner, J. 5
[59] Ibid. 5

> assumption that women are properly confined to the private, domestic sphere: third, a rationalization that women, exempted by the sages, cannot conduct communal rites on behalf of those obligated to perform them; and fourth, an atavistic fear of women as sexually disturbing and dangerously contaminating creatures who must be barred from the public domain lest their presence distract men from intellectual and spiritual pursuits."[60]

Yet this fear of independent women was to some degree mitigated by the models of piety and righteousness found in the bible, women like Hannah, Deborah, and the daughters of Zelophehad, who are praised in B. Bava Batra 119b as "intelligent women". In fact, the rabbinic sages argue that the women of the wilderness generation consistently outstripped their male fellow travelers in their faith in God and personal courage. According to *Numbers Rabbah* 21:10, the Israelite women refused to contribute to the building of the golden calf. They are also praised for rejecting the cowardly council of the ten spies on their first foray into Israel.

Aviva Cantor understands the role of women in a patriarchy being essentially that of an enabler. Jewish women are meant "to facilitate what men decide is their work, which is always considered the most important work in the society, and to accept/endure exclusion from this work turf so that, in the absence of women from it, it can define manhood. When (in rabbinic culture and the Jewish experience) masculinity was redefined as spiritual resistance, a woman's enabler role was to facilitate it and to accept exclusion from it"[61]. In this reality, women are the victims of double discrimination:

> "First, the sages exempt her from the performance of time-contingent precepts, then they claim that, being subject to fewer religious obligations, she is less sanctified than

[60] Wegner, J. 148
[61] Cantor, A. 5

> a man, and her life correspondingly less valuable. By their own logic the sages are quite right: it is true that their exclusion of the Israelite woman from the life of the mind and spirit has made her life qualitatively poorer, hence objectively worth less than that of a man."[62]

Exclusion from learning Torah was rationalized on the grounds that women were unsuited to intellectual pursuits, and instead were meant to channel their energies into the maintenance of the Jewish home. The most famous discussion of the possibility of Torah learning for women is found in Mishna Sotah 3:4. Within a discussion of the procedural details of the ritual for a woman accused of adultery, we read

> "Ben Azai infers that it is a man's duty to teach his daughter Torah so that if she must drink (participate in the sotah ritual) she should know that the merit will hold her punishment in suspense. R. Eliezer says: If any man teaches his daughter Law it is as though he taught her lewdness. R. Joshua says: A woman prefers one measure with lewdness to nine measures with chastity[63] He used to say: A foolish pious man, a wicked cunning man, a sanctimonious woman and the self-inflicted wounds of the Pharisees—these ruin the world"

This does not mean that there were no learned women. Such women tended to be close relatives of major scholars, like the legendary wife of Rabbi Meir's, Bruriah (who admittedly does not meet a good end), and, from later rabbinic tradition, Rashi's daughters (who, while learned themselves, were considered most remarkable for being the mothers of the Tosafists). These women were not only knowledgeable in Torah, but are also remembered for having taught men, albeit in a restricted fashion. Accounts of truly learned women are exceptional, but the fact of their existence leads us to assume that in more cases than are mentioned, fathers in particular might have

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[62] Wegner, J. 167

[63] Which Blackman clarifies as meaning "A woman prefers little and poverty but life with her husband to plenty and riches but separation from her husband." 347-348

taken upon themselves the responsibility for educating their daughters. On balance, however, exclusion from learning meant that women were deprived of a role in shaping the halacha and Torah discourse which in turn shaped Jewish communal life and women's roles in that life.

In Carnal Israel, Boyarin also links women's exclusion from the intellectual sphere, and from prestigious social institutions, with male fears of their sexuality. Focusing on the Talmudic period in Palestine and Babylonia, he argues that in Palestine women studying Torah was a realistic possibility (hence the existence of Bruriah narratives), while in Babylon the prevailing attitude was that an intellectually or politically active woman was one who had thrown off sexual constraints. In his view, the Babylonian conception developed as a kind of male line of defense. Men's power in the world gave them superiority that compensated them for women's reproductive superiority, and at the same time guaranteed that the latter process would continue. And because the Babylonian Talmud remains the authoritative one for later generations, its attitudes towards women's learning are enshrined in communal practice as well.

Even though women were by and large restricted from the sphere of Torah learning, their role in the maintenance and transmission of Judaism was not negligible. In the rabbinic conception of the Jewish world, the home was one of the major support systems on which Jewish life rested. The home was the locus for myriad ritual observances and ceremonies, including the exact observance of kashrut,

Shabbat, and many aspects of the holidays. The power of this sphere is demonstrated in a quote about shtetl life provided by Aviva Cantor.

> "The mother is responsible for the physical aspects of the home's yiddishkeit (Jewishness, Jewish values and their expression), by which is meant the total way of life of the 'real Jew'...All the intricate apparatus of domestic religious observance is in her keeping. Every member of the household depends on her vigilance to keep him a 'good Jew' in the daily mechanics of living."[64]

Responsibility for the maintenance of the home did not mean that women were restricted entirely to the private sphere, nor were women without power or agency altogether. They were essential to the economic functioning of the family and community, and in these capacities often occupied very public roles. It is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine the flower of Jewish womanhood in any century being characterized as shrinking violets. Wild roses, perhaps, with sturdy stems and plenty of thorns, but never violets. As Daniel Boyarin pointedly remarks,

> "While their men were sitting indoors and studying Torah, speaking only a Jewish language, and withdrawn from the world, women of the same class were speaking, reading, and writing the vernacular, maintaining businesses large and small, and dealing with the wide world of tax collectors and irate customers."[65]

But this public economic power did not compel them into communal leadership[66]. "The 'fact' then that Jewish women (of certain classes) had opportunities in the secular world and access to education and economic power and autonomy beyond that of their husbands must not be permitted to erase the fact that, nevertheless, within Jewish culture these roles were genuinely less valued than those

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[64] Cantor, A. 101
[65] Boyarin, D. Unheroic Conduct xxii
[66] Cantor, A. 5

of men."[67] Real status, and flowing from that status, power, was maintained tightly within the realm of Torah learning from which women were functionally excluded.

[67] Boyarin, D. Unheroic Conduct xxii

Chapter 2

From "Second Sex" to Single Sex
The Religious Lives of Pre-Modern Jewish Women

**"Biology is not enough to give an answer to the question that is before us:
Why is woman the *Other*?**

--Simone de Beauvior

The previous chapter attempted to establish what it meant to be a Jewish man or woman in the rabbinic imagination. This chapter demonstrates the impact of this rabbinic vision on the lives of Jewish women after the Talmudic period. Ultimately the "rabbinic woman", always something of a fantasy, no longer exists in liberal Jewish communities at all. All of us, men and women, fulfill the role of "rabbinic men".

What is the impact of gender on the religious sphere? One of the ways to ensure male hegemony in Judaism was to limit women's access to the tools and institution of public religious life. The rhetorical basis of this attempt hinges on the interpretation and application of Psalm 45:19 "*Kol kebudah bat melech penimah.*" This verse, which translates as "All the glory of a king's daughter lies within" has long been cited as proof that, according to tradition, women have divinely ordained roles that preclude any public activity. This beautiful image has been cited as justification for excluding women from public life, restricting their dress, and stressing that women's

sole legitimate sphere of activity is within the home.[68] In the preface to their book, Daughters of the King, Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut trace the evolution of rabbinic interpretation of this verse from its original biblical context as a hymn written in praise of an earthly king to the proof text for the justification of clearly delineated male and female roles in Judaism: that the proper place for women is in the home and not in the public eye.

The Talmudic and midrashic interpretations of the verse as encouraging female modesty and commitment to the home[69] are finally codified by Maimonides in the 12th century in his *Mishneh Torah*. In the context of a discussion about a husband's obligation to provide appropriate clothing for his wife in *Hilchot Ishut* (Laws of Marriage), 13:11. He says:

> "In a place where it is the custom for a women to go out to the market with a cap (*Kippah*) on her head and a veil that covers her entire body, like a tallit, he (her husband) gives her, included in her dress, the simplest type of veil. And if he is wealthy, he gives her according to his wealth, in order that she may go out in it to her father's house, or to the house of mourning, or to the house of feasting. Because every woman may come and go to her fathers house to visit him, and to the house of mourning, and to the house of feasting to do kindness to her friends or to her relatives, so that they will similarly visit her. For she is not in prison that she may not go out or come in. However, it is shameful for a woman to always be going out, one time outdoors, another time on the streets. And a husband should stop his wife from this and should not allow her to go outside except perhaps once a month or perhaps a few times a month, according to the need. Because it is not becoming to a woman. Rather she should sit within her home, for so it is written: "The king's daughter is all glorious within."

While Maimonides remains the iconic example of this attitude towards the place of women in Jewish society, Grossman and Haupt point to the large body of modern apologetic literature that has grown out of his thinking, all arguing to limit the sphere of Jewish women to the home. They cite in particular the widely-read

[68] Grossman, Susan & Rivka Haut. Daughters of the King xxii
[69] see TJ Yoma 1:1 on modesty and Tanhuma on Gen.34:1 (the rape of Dinah)

work of Moshe Meiselman, who cites "the king's daughter is all glorious within" as the basis for his opposition to all attempts by women to find fulfillment by expanding their religious observance into nontraditional areas which, even if not technically prohibited by Jewish law, are contrary to the "Divine imperative" to women[70].

The single verse about the king's daughter is only the poetic tip of the iceberg of rabbinic restriction of women to the home sphere. The ur-text for the halachic argument against the inclusion of women in communal religious life is found in Mishna Brachot 3:3, which exempts women from the obligation (hiyuv) of set daily prayer[71]. This exemption in turn is buttressed by the Talmudic principle that women are free from commandments that must traditionally be performed at a specific time (*mitzvoth aseh sh'hazman gerama*). The exemption of women from the obligation of prayer was justified on the grounds that the manifold tasks evolving upon them as homemakers made it impossible for them to observe prayer and other time-bound obligations at the specified hour.

As Orthodox scholar Tamar Ross characterizes it, out of this ruling the whole body of rabbinic thinking about women's roles develops in the following way[72]. First, women's primary function emerges as that of enablers whose merited statues is earned vicariously through their husbands' and sons' religious achievements. Men are counted as part of the prayer minyan, women are not. Men acquire women in marriage and initiate divorce. Men have greater obligations in the study of Torah and

[70] Grossman, S. xxv
[71] Blackman, P. Mishnayot vol. Zeraim, 46
[72] Ross, T. "Modern Orthodoxy and the Challenge of Feminism" 6

in the performance of mitzvoth. Men possess greater rights and privileges than women in all matters of communal leadership and authority. They are the official heads of their families and normally the sole inheritors in property law. Finally, and most problematically in a community predicated on the unifying authority of a cohesive legal system, not only are women not the intended audience of halachic stipulations, being generally excluded from the public arena, but in practice, they also have no official part to play in the legislative and halachic process.

Robert Gordis argues that the principle of female exceptionalism was never universally applied. For example, women are halachically responsible for kindling Shabbat and Festival lights, making Kiddush, and hearing shofar on Rosh Hashanah. Also, like men, women are obligated to hear the megilla on Purim, "since they too were involved on that miracle of salvation" (B. Megillah 4a). For those looking to make the argument that rabbinic strictures for women were misapplied by later interpreters, Gordis' conclusions are helpful:

> "It is therefore a reasonable conclusion that the principle that women were excused from the obligation to observe mitzvoth having a specific time frame is a generalization from a few specific instances and not a universally binding rule...in our case, the rule is clearly descriptive and not prescriptive, as the many exceptions make clear. The application of this rule to women's prayer is, therefore, a rationalization after the fact rather than a reason for its enactment. Apologetics aside, the retention of this rule is an expression of the inferior status of women and of their segregation from public life."[73]

Gordis makes a cogent argument, and as comforting as these conclusions are to the modern liberal Jew, they do little to mitigate the historical lived reality of women in the Jewish community since the rabbinic period.

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[73] Gordis, Robert. "On the Ordination of Women" 6

Another major halachic impediment to public roles for women is the Talmudic statement attributed to Samuel that claimed, "*Kol b'ishah ervah*" (The voice of a woman is indecent/lascivious). In TB Berachot 24a, this statement was applied to reciting the Shema. This central and frequent prayer was not to be recited by a man if he could hear a woman singing at the same time. The underlying reason was that her voice would distract him from his concentration on prayer. The acceptance of these ideas is clearly illustrated in works like *Sefer Hasidim* from 13th century Germany, where it is stated, "It is impossible for a bachelor to teach girls (Torah)." Part of the explanation for this is that "the voice of a woman is indecent. Rather, the father should teach his daughter and his wife"[74]. If women could not be heard, their ability to serve in communal situations was severely limited, except in an all-female environment.

The other rabbinic dictate employed by later generations to limit women's participation in public religious life is the idea of "*kevod hatzibbur*" (communal honor). The meaning of this in the rabbinic mind is made clear in BT *Megillah* 23a, which states:

> "Everyone is included in the counting of seven [aliyot], even a woman, even a child, but women may not read because of *kevod hatzibbur*"

This text objects to the active inclusion of women in the Torah reading ceremony on the grounds that their participation violates the dignity of the community. Several interpretations have been offered by modern scholars to explain this concept, which

[74] this paragraph from *Sefer Hasidim* is translated by Rachel Biale in Women and Jewish Law 35-36

Alick Isaacs summarizes in her article "Kevod Hatzibbur: Towards a Contextualist History". For example, Shmuel and Chana Safrai argue that this Talmudic prohibition was related to sexuality. Isaacs explains their thinking:

> "The appearance of a woman center stage before men in a synagogue was bound to attract sexual attention and distract the men from following the Torah reading. According to the Safrais, the introduction of impure thoughts into the synagogue was perceived by the rabbis of the Talmud as a violation of the honor and dignity of the (male) community, hence the use of the term *kevod hatzibbur*."[75]

In response to this argument, David Golinkin argues in an extensive responsum permitting women to read Torah that kevod hatzibbur was invoked throughout the Talmud to obviate embarrassment to the community[76]. In the case of a women reading from the Torah, the scene itself suggested to an observer that there are no men in the community capable of reading in her stead. Hence, men are put to shame by her participation.

Objects in the Rearview Mirror – Talmud Gender, and the Medieval Period

It is now generally accepted by academic scholars that the Talmud and the rabbinic worldview it reflected did not have the force of law in its own time[77]. Where it becomes significant in more than a purely academic way is when the document is transformed from rabbinic fantasy of how the rabbis wished the world to be to the medieval Jew's blueprint for how the religious community ought to be. The rabbis'

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[75] Isaacs, Alick. "Kevod Hatzibbur: Towards a Contextualist History" 263
[76] cited in A. Isaacs 263
[77] Hauptman, J. Rereading the Rabbis

vision for the subordination of women to men segued well with the hierarchical society of the feudal era.

In the prevailing Christian theory of the "Great Chain of Being", every individual, man or woman, was the inferior of someone else. This was true across the social class spectrum, and the family hierarchy was a microcosm of it. This is not to say that women were without status; women provided essential functions within the social and family system. Gender roles were largely complimentary, as men and women (and their respective work) supplement each other. Both roles were necessary, but not valued equally.

Particularly in the medieval period, there is copious evidence for the essential economic role of women in the running and maintenance of family businesses. We know from such evidence as the memoirs of Gluckel of Hameln that, especially with the additional obligation of men to study Torah, the Jewish community's economic viability was predicated on the active participation, and even in some cases leadership, of women. Perhaps the best characterization of the complicated role of Jewish women in the Middle Ages belongs to Irish Parush:

> "Over the years, the lifestyle which crystallized in Jewish society caused men to cluster under the sacred tent of Torah study, and the women to stand in the front line of the daily confrontation with the outside world...an interesting combination of weakness and power—of inferiority in terms of traditional Jewish perspective and superiority in terms of the trends of Europeanization—opened the door of opportunity so to speak for certain circles of the female population"[78]

[78] Parush, I. cited by Boyarin in Unheroic Conduct xxii

In a more limited way, this economic agency of medieval Jewish women was reflected in their spiritual lives as well. Some women even occupied, though in a fairly limited and gender-specific way, communal religious roles. Both Rashi and his grandson Rabbeinu Tam acknowledge that while women are not obligated to pray the set daily services, they are not prohibited from it either.[79] From the limited historical evidence, it is unclear how pervasive women's participation in public prayer and ritual was, but there is substantial evidence that it did happen, at least to some degree. In her excellent article "Women's Voices, Women's Prayers", Emily Taitz provides numerous citations from the responsa literature permitting limited public prayer roles for women. In general, their conclusions follow the ruling by Rabbi Jacob ben Moses (Maharil, late 14th-early 15th c.), who argued that women who are educated and obey all the commandments may recite prayers, but most women did not fall into this category.

Because of male anxiety rooted in the ideas of *kol b'isha ervah* and *kevod hatzibbur*, women were precluded from participation in the central rituals of the synagogue. They were not counted as part of the required minyan or other rituals associated with sanctity, like the reading of Torah or the leading of prayer for the "official" community, the community of adult men. Women are not the only ones precluded from these roles. Minors by and large were unable to fulfill these obligations, and even certain categories of adult men, like lepers and vagrants, who were present in the social sphere, but occupying only marginal roles, could experience

[79] Rashi on TB Berachot 20a-b and Jacob Tam in Tosafot to TB Berachot 20b

similar marginalization in terms of public ritual life. But it was women who made up the largest and most consistent category of those systematically precluded from public leadership and even visibility. As Isaacs succinctly states. "Their presence detracted from the essentially masculine and sacred quality of the ritual setting"[80]. and so was minimized wherever possible.

It would be incorrect to argue that women were not present at all in public religious life. Women's galleries provide physical evidence that at least from the 13th century, women had the option to be present in most Ashkenazi synagogues. Taitz documents women like Urania of Worms, who in the 13th century is credited with being the cantor of the women there.[81] Her tombstone calls her "...the eminent and excellent lady Urania, daughter of R. Abraham, who was chief of the synagogue singers...(who) with sweet tunefulness, officiated before the female worshippers to whom she sang the hymnal portions." Taitz cites women like Urania, Richenza of Nuremberg, and Dulcie of Worms as evidence of female prayer leadership. Even further, Morris Fairstein cites examples of women credited with prophecy and mystical visions as early as the 12th century, with a particular flowering during the messianic fervor surrounding Shabbatai Tzvi in the 1660s[82].

Though there is little mention of female religious leadership in the early Middle Ages, by the later Middle Ages, evidence of women's galleries or rooms, women's prayers, and women prayer leaders becomes more plentiful. Taitz speculates that

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[80] Isaacs, A. 280
[81] Taitz, Emily. "Women's Voices, Women's Prayers" 64
[82] Fairstein, Morris M. "Women as Prophets and Visionaries in Medieval and Early Modern Judaism" 247-259

these jobs probably fell to the most learned women in community, often the female relatives of prominent rabbis[83]. These women were most likely to possess the requisite knowledge to lead prayer and the social clout to withstand the pressures of convention encouraging them to stay home. In Eastern Europe such women were known as *firzogerins* (foresayers), and the institution of a prayer leader for the women was maintained throughout Russia and Poland until the early 20th century[84].

Jewish women's spiritual life was also given voice through the genre of *tehines*, prayers written in the Yiddish vernacular largely for, and sometimes even by, women[85]. The first *tehineh* to appear in print was one for a woman to say before immersion in the mikveh, published in Krakow in 1577[86], and its presence in a volume of *tehines* indicates that the composition of these private petitional prayers was a long standing and familiar custom. In the words of Shulamit Berger, "*Tehines* offered women a direct pipeline to God."[87] Their tone is conversational, addressing God respectfully but familiarly, like a friend or neighbor. There are *tehines* for every occasion in women's lives, from those addressing a bride before marriage, to those suffering miscarriage, to mother's marking the first day of school for a son. Many of the *tehines* are meant to be recited in the synagogue. Prayers for the High Holy Days, Rosh Hodesh, and Shabbat all tend to indicate that women were present in the synagogue on these occasions. Many *tehines* have a direct connection to the synagogue

[83] Taitz, E. 65
[84] Ibid. 67
[85] for the definitive work on this subject see Chava Weissler's Voices of the Matriarchs
[86] Berger, Shulamit. "Tehines: A Brief Survey of Women's Prayers" in Daughters of the King 74
[87] Ibid. 74

liturgy. Often they are addressed not only to God, but also to the Matriarchs, who are invoked as intermediaries, much as the more established custom of petition on the merits of the Patriarchs. All of these factors point to the existence of women's spiritual lives, albeit in a consistently secondary status to men.

And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: Emancipation and Jewish Women

This understanding of Jewish women's roles eventually exploded for all but the most self-isolating Jewish communities under the pressure exerted by the social and religious upheaval following the Emancipation of European Jews and the advent of the modern era. Tamar Ross, as a contemporary Modern Orthodox feminist, gives voice to the challenge of shifting women's roles in the Orthodox community, only the latest reflection of changes that have been taking place in more liberal Jewish communities for three hundred years. As she puts it,

> "The woman's role in Jewish society stands in direct opposition to Western democratic ideals and to modern notions regarding the nature of gender distinctions. In a growing number of societies around the world, a more egalitarian reality is developing where women are engaged in careers outside the home and where men and women share responsibility for household and communal affairs. This new reality has created pressure for official legal and social recognition of women's equality in law, in financial remuneration, and in opportunities for education and leadership. Even in the more stringently Orthodox, or haredi, sections of the community (where there is ideological opposition to such change), a new financial reality is taking hold wherein the wife is often not only the main bread winner but also the decision-maker in matters of household and even family policy. All of this does not easily fit the image of woman as found in the traditional sources. The unavoidable question is to what degree these two realities can continue to be dichotomized."[88]

[88] Ross, T. 6

Much has been written about the dialectic between Judaism and modernity. This paper does not seek to analyze this field in its entirety. As Paula Hyman frames this discussion in her article "Two Models of Modernization":

> "Like most phenomena in Jewish history, the ways in which European Jews were modernized has been discussed almost exclusively without consideration of gender differences. By modernization, a highly contested term, I mean the socioeconomic, political, and cultural changes that occurred as a consequences of emancipation (or its promise), capitalist development, and the exposure of Jews to secularism. It includes the erosion of Jewish communal autonomy and of rabbinic authority, the dissemination among Jews of secular culture, and the reconsideration of their self-definition as well as of their relations to the larger society. These changes, many of which continue into our own time, first gained real momentum during the "long nineteenth century," which extended from the French revolution until the First World War."[89]

The changes wrought on Jews and Judaism in the modern period, particularly in the area of gender, are so profound that the traditional models virtually no longer apply. In the realm of liberal Judaism, "women" as envisioned by the rabbis, essentially no longer exist. Instead, particularly within the liberal synagogue setting, we are all rabbinic men.

As the early 20th century Yiddish writer Y.L. Peretz recognized, while traditional Jewish religion afforded a man "many little avenues of escape from his burdens," women's possibilities were more restricted. Only modernity seemed to offer them the release that men had long enjoyed.[90] Because of this, many Jewish women, particularly those who enjoyed increasing access to secular education, turned away from traditional Judaism, and sometimes from the Jewish community altogether. This phenomenon was most pronounced among the growing Central European

[89] Hyman, Paula E. "Two Models of Modernization: Jewish Women in the German and the Russian Empires" 39
[90] Breslauer, S. D. "Stories and Subversion" 82

Jewish elite, who were the first to experience the temptations of assimilation and reap the potential benefits of conversion or secularism. Bertha Pappenheim, a contemporary observer, identified the unique impact this had on women:

> "The indifference with which everything women and girls learned was treated compared to what men and boys were to learn and know, introduced a continuous current into the women's world...Particularly among the Jewish women a thirst for education clearly marked by German culture grew that made new cultural elements accessible to the bilingual, often trilingual (if French was added) women of the higher classes"[91]

This thirst for knowledge and social mobility by modern Jewish women has long been identified, albeit in a largely negative fashion, with the patronesses of musical and intellectual salons among the elite of German, Austrian, and French Jewish society at the turn of the 19th century. Jewish historians like Jacob Katz[92] long argued that these women took the lead in the abandonment of Jewish tradition because the established Jewish community failed to provide them with a solid Jewish education. Hence, the argument follows, they were particularly vulnerable to the lure of the new doctrines of Enlightenment, and later, Romanticism.

More recent scholarship has complicated this picture. We now know that in the period following the Napoleonic wars and into the 20th century, in contrast to earlier years, Jewish women throughout Germany displayed fewer signs of radical assimilation, such as intermarriage and conversion, than did men. More importantly, Marion Kaplan has demonstrated that Jewish women were a conservative force within the Jewish home, maintaining aspects of Jewish ritual custom even as their male

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[91] Pappenheim, Bertha "The Jewish Woman" in *Bertha Pappenheim, Leben und Schriften*, ed. Dora Edinger. Trans. Renata Stein. Frankfurt am Main: Ner Tamid Publisers, 1963, cited in *Unheroic Conduct* xxii

[92] Katz, Jacob. Emancipation and Assimilation

counterparts abandoned them.[93] At the same time, German Jewish women were active in the earliest efforts of the Reform movement. In reference to the founding of the Hamburg temple in 1818, historian Leopold Zunz tells us that "the inclination for a reform of the worship service was stirred among many, especially among the female sex," and the Hamburg temple drew a far higher percentage of women than did the traditional services[94].

While the Jewish community as a whole was grappling with the challenges of the emerging Reform and Conservative movements and the fracturing of the fairly cohesive pre-Emancipation collective, something strange was happening to women vis a vis traditional rabbinic gender roles. On the one hand, rabbinic taboos about women's education were collapsing as Jewish women increasingly pursued first secular and eventually even religious education. On the other hand, under the influence of a non-Jewish conception of the cult of domesticity, as Jewish families achieved bourgeois status, from the 1850's on, women who could afford to retired from the public economic sphere[95]. In keeping with Romantic ideals, the middle class economic ideal understood men by nature to be out in the world, active in civil, economic, and political life. Women, in contrast, were naturally expected to be cared for by their husbands, and their identity was entirely shaped by their marriage and family responsibilities. Women, therefore, belonged entirely in the home, where they

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[93] Kaplan, Marion. *Making of the Jewish Middle Class* 64-84, and "Tradition and Transition: Jewish Women in Imperial Germany" in Baskin (ed.) *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective* 227-247
[94] Meyer, Michael. 55
[95] Hyman, Paula. "Two Models of Modernization" 41

could take care of the physical, spiritual, and moral needs of their husbands and children.

This understanding of a woman's place eventually came to pervade Jewish culture in both the Old World and the New. In her study of immigrant culture on New York's Lower East Side at the turn of the 20th century, the height of Jewish immigration, Elizabeth Ewen notes, "Both middle-class American culture and immigrant men in particular considered it demeaning for women to work outside the home after marriage. It was assumed that husbands who allowed this were incapable of supporting their families on their own."[96]

Yet at the same time, increasing numbers of Jewish women, particularly in the crumbling Russian empire and among Eastern European immigrants to the United States, were involved in socialist and radical political activities, unionization efforts, and the battle for women's suffrage. America presented new opportunities for immigrant Jewish women, among these the ability to earn their own living and, with it, the potential to choose their own spouse. In contrast to their mothers, who were largely partnered by arrangement in the Old World, most immigrant women selected their own mates.[97] According to Sydney Weinberg, author of *World of Our Mothers*, "Like the idea of a 'chief rabbi', the marriage broker never really caught on in this country". Although parental approval remained a factor, the ability to earn wages fostered unwillingness among immigrant Jewish women to marry someone chosen for

[96] Ewen, Elizabeth. Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars 230
[97] McGinity, Keren R. "Immigrant Jewish Women Who Married Out" 263-288

them or whom they disliked. And yet, even with these remarkable changes in many traditional patterns of behavior, shortly after they began to earn and income, young Jewish women married and began raising families.

Susan Glenn in her book, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation*, contends that Jewish working womens' involvement in two overlapping contexts, urban mass culture and political activism in the garment industry, eased constraints on female behavior. Girls entered the workforce and became involved in union activities, thus expanding the traditional female sphere. Paradoxically, once they married, they settled into domestic life. Glenn writes, "One image emphasized women's ability to fight side by side with men to help earn a living and to struggle for worker's rights. The other stressed the respectability and romantic promise that women sought in the role of modern wife-companion." Moreover, "gender equality was never as important as working-class equality" for those involved in unions.[98]

Adoption of bourgeoisie gender roles did not categorically signal mass assimilation. The maintenance and transmission of Jewish identity was still important, even as many of the traditional institutions and markers were disappearing. For middle class (and aspiring) Jewish women, their responsibilities were two-fold: to raise well-behaved and carefully educated children, primed for economic success (boys) and household management (girls), while ensuring these children remained loyal to their Jewish heritage, though not necessarily in terms of traditional observance. According to Paula Hyman, "In adhering to this bourgeois division of

[98] Susan Glenn, Daughters of the Shtetl 210, 238-9

labor, Jewish women enacted the female version of the modern Jew; they were not resisting Western values, but were rather expressing them in the form deemed most natural for persons of their sex."

It follows logically that if women are at home, men become the primary financial support for most families. This disturbance of the traditional Jewish economic pattern, whereby women or the family as a whole are the primary economic engine, thereby freeing men for Torah study at least some of the time, had profound implications for the modern Jewish community.

Chapter 3

Out of the Darkness and into the...Neutral?

New World, New Questions

For three centuries, the key question for American Jews has been how to preserve and maintain Jewish identity in spite of small numbers and pressure from the dominant culture to conform. While this perhaps sounds like the age-old Jewish dilemma, what is unique to the American experience is that Jews had never before been so free to choose their own path. The sacred freedoms of the individual enshrined in the Constitution run counter to the communal ethos that was key to Jewish survival through the centuries. Jews in the new world struggled to find the balance that would ensure community survival as well as individual success, and in every generation and by each individual, that balance must be recalibrated.

Many traditional roles and institutions from European Jewish communities failed to survive transplantation in America. Formal internal communal governance, known in Europe as the Kehillah, proved impossible to maintain in a country where any Jew could opt out, and community leadership was limited to its persuasive, rather than coercive, powers. It was the synagogue, or as Jonathan Sarna calls it, the "synagogue-community" that became the central organizing institution of Jewish life in America[99]. Since Jews were first permitted to worship publicly in 1703, the synagogue dominated

[99] Sarna, Jonathan. American Judaism 12

Jewish life. But like American churches, the American synagogue was more than a place of worship – it was the central address for the community, the place for gathering, organizing, and socializing. Over and over again, the synagogue was the space in which American Jews worked out questions of religious identity.

While beginning as uniquely male territory, the American synagogue evolved in such a way that by the end of the twentieth century, the gender ethos in the synagogue was one of egalitarianism and neutrality. All roles and responsibilities could be assumed equally by men or women, with no official regard paid to their gender. This victory changed everything and nothing for liberal Jews. While a major break with traditional Jewish gender roles, it actually changed little of what was happening in the synagogue. By the end of the twentieth century, women were equally present physically in the synagogue, but with the religious status of defacto men. They were still not fully present in an embodied sense.

Despite the exceptions for women elaborated in the previous chapter, the traditional European synagogue was indisputably male territory. Under Sephardic influence, the values of early American synagogues were "tradition and deference". As Sarna characterizes it,

> "These values had stood Sephardic Jews in good stead for generations and were considered essential to Jewish survival itself...In matters of Jewish worship too, (colonial Sephardic Jews) closely conformed to the traditional minhag as practiced by Portuguese Jews in Europe and the West Indies. Innovations were prohibited; "our duty is to imitate our forefathers." On a deeper level, Sephardic Jews believed, as did the Catholics among whom they had so long lived, that ritual could unite those whom life had dispersed."[100]

[100] Sarna, J.13

But as hard as early community leaders tried, the model of European Jewish life proved impossible to maintain in America, though for several hundred years, the underlying gender roles remained the same, especially in the synagogue. For example, in colonial New York, where Protestant women frequented church, Jewish women attended synagogue much more punctiliously than their counterparts in the Old World, and seats were assigned to them.[101] However, these seats were still in women's section, in synagogues governed and led by men.

In light of the demographic realities of a growing, diverse, and geographically dispersed Jewish community, Jacob Rader Marcus argued that at the turn of the 19th century, in the United States "there were almost as many Judaisms as there were individuals"[102] and this supremacy of individual freedom remained a guiding force in American Jewish life. Women particularly benefited from this new spirit of freedom. The first changes were largely cosmetic, but while token, not completely insignificant, as they proved to be harbingers of more profound changes to come. In the early 19th century, women began to come down from the balcony to sing in mixed choirs in the main sanctuary.[103] The construction of women's sections also began to change. As new synagogues were built, high screens no longer blocked women's visibility[104], as they had in Sephardic and traditional Ashkenazi synagogues. Instead, American women enjoyed unobstructed views of the bimah, and were in turn more exposed to

[101] Sarna, J. 18
[102] Marcus, J. R. United States Jewry 1:610-613
[103] Sarna, J. 47
[104] Ibid. 47

the men's gaze. While the central rituals of the service were still performed exclusively by men, America offered women more freedom to feel physically part of general synagogue life than they enjoyed almost anywhere else in the world[105].

In the wake of the American Revolution, Protestant women played a highly public role in religion. Women came to dominate attendance in church pews and accepted religion as part of their sphere.[106] While influenced by the dominant religious culture, American Judaism of the day was not feminized in the same way Protestant Christianity experienced. As long as the synagogue's central performative rituals – prayer leadership, Torah reading, and sermon delivery remained exclusively the province of men, gender roles within the synagogue, and within Jewish communal life, remained essentially the same.

Not everything in Jewish life remained static, of course. Rather, according to Sarna, "during the sweeping religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening, Jewish men and women alike experienced new interest in their faith"[107]. Isaac Lesser, the foremost leader of traditionalist Judaism in the middle of the nineteenth century, credited the innovation of English-language sermons to the encouragement of "some intelligent ladies" within his congregation, which Sarna points to as an example of the significant behind-the-scenes role women played in promoting the Jewish renaissance during the period.[108]

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[105] Goldman, Beyond the Synagogue Gallery 51-54
[106] Sarna, J. 48
[107] Ibid. 49
[108] Ibid. 76

Women supplied a great deal of the energy behind the late nineteenth century American Jewish awakening. By 1869, most American Jews who received any formal Jewish education at all likely learned most of what they knew from female teachers. These teachers in turn had to educate themselves in Judaism, which they did with the aid of new textbooks, some of them written by women as well. Hebrew teachers' colleges, like Gratz College in Philadelphia, trained women on an equal basis with men. However, while women's communal influence expanded, particularly in the new sphere of the Sunday School movement and in women's benevolent societies, their role within the leadership and worship structures in synagogues remained unchanged. As Grace Pool puts the situation of Jewish women of the day in her book, An Old Faith in the New World, "Increasingly, in response to the perceived crisis of the day, women were fulfilling new roles within the Jewish community, expanding on those that they had formerly carried out largely within the home."[109]

As the Jewish community diversified into denominational movements towards the end of the nineteenth century, challenges to male hegemony within the synagogue did begin to emerge, albeit somewhat obliquely. For example, one's position on the physical place of women within synagogue life became a key indicator of particular affiliation and identity. Mixed seating, what critics called the "promiscuous seating of women with men"[110], was the most contentious of the reforms that became wide spread during the heyday of early Reform, the first significant movement to develop in

[109] Pool, G. An Old Faith in the New World 39-70
[110] Sarna, J. "The Debate Over Mixed Seating in the American Synagogue"

American Judaism. Arguments over seating served as a shorthand way to debate differences on a host of fundamental issues concerning how best to respond to modernity's challenge[111], and in staking its ideological commitment to "family pews", among a host of other issues, Reform Jews declared their independence from traditional Judaism and struck the first blow for some expression of gender equity in Jewish ritual and liturgical life.

Mixed seating, while contentious, was not a complete innovation by American Reform. Reform Jews in Germany had brought women down from the balcony and abandoned the mechitza, but still seated men and women separately, as was the pattern in local Lutheran churches. In American churches, however, mixed-gender seating had already become the norm in the eighteenth century as part of church efforts to "strengthen the family against the menacing forces of industrialization"[112], in line with the theory that "the family that prays together stays together". Synagogue practices of seating that separated families was perceived as degrading and came in for significant criticism.

Despite some historical precedent from German and American Reform synagogues, the mass transition to mixed seating which began in Isaac Mayer Wise's Albany congregation soon became a divisive ideological issue for the American Jewish community as a whole. As Jonathan Sarna characterized the issue:

> "To its reform supporters, [mixed seating] represented the religious equalization of women, as well as such positive values as family togetherness, conformity to local

[111] Sarna, J. American Judaism 128
[112] Ibid. 127

> norms, a modern, progressive image, and saving the youth. To its Orthodox opponents, the same change implied abandonment of tradition, violation of Jewish law, assimilation, Christianization, and promiscuity."[113]

And yet, even within congregations affiliated with the "radical reformers" of Wise's Union of American Hebrew Congregations, there remained limits to gender equalization, especially within the sanctuary itself. While radical liturgical change was innovated, first in Wise's Minhag America and later in the first commonly adopted Reform siddur, The Union Prayer Book, including the elimination of entire services, the restriction of Hebrew and corresponding domination of English as the language of prayer, and emphasis on the universalistic aspects of God and Jewish faith, there was virtually nothing in the new prayer books to indicate that they were composed for a radical new community, demographically speaking. The Reform siddurim did eliminate the odious blessing praising God for not making one a woman, but any other liturgical changes signaling the religious equality, or even presence, of women would have to be the work of a new generation.

This truth in synagogue life extended to congregational leadership as well. Within the national Reform movement, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, and in the leadership of local congregations, Jewish women continued to play a subordinate role. Both men and women in the Reform movement shared the prevalent notion that the women's primary role was to be her husband's helpmate and the mother of their children. As an example of the pervasiveness of this understanding of gender roles, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the

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[113] Sarna, J. 128

rabbinical body of the Reform movement, turned down resolutions twice in support of women's suffrage, before one finally carried in 1917—only three years before adoption of the United States constitutional amendment[114].

As elaborated in the previous chapter, in spite of the widespread adoption of mixed seating in synagogues and the strong presence of women in congregational life, there remained a fairly strict dichotomy between men's and women's roles in the survival and maintenance of the American Jewish community. Women continued to play a far more central role in maintaining the spirit of Judaism in the home through cooking, cleaning, and child rearing, while men were more likely to focus their religious activities within the synagogue, where they prayed, studied, and socialized. Sarna attributes this gender-role differentiation as the reason that men in the 1916 US religious census made up 60.7 percent of synagogue members, women only 39.3 percent. This was the reverse of the general pattern in American religion, where women outnumbered men in churches by 56.1 percent to 43.9 percent.[115] While women were now an established presence in many main sanctuary pews, the synagogue itself remained male space, though its days as such were numbered.

Rabbis, even Reform ones, who remained the symbolic exemplars of Jewish male privilege, were highly ambivalent about the penetration of women into spheres other than the domestic. Emil G. Hirsch, for example, denied that men and women were equal in natural competencies, but as a political liberal, he favored women's

[114] Marcus, J.R The American Jewish Woman, 2:389-92
[115] Sarna, J. 164

suffrage and could not deny the platform of Sinai Congregation to Jane Addams, the Chicago social reformer.

It was in congregational lay leadership, rather than ecclesiastical changes that the barricade between men and women's roles first began to crumble. Kauffman Kohler, a key early Reform rabbinical leader, held up an ideal of gentle femininity and doubted that it was a woman's vocation "to become a man", but he decried the discrimination against women in traditional Judaism. He frequently and publicly declared that the synagogues, too long dominated by the petty commercialism of the men, required the idealism of women's spirit. He even added, "Yes, we need Reform Jewish leaders of the feminine sex."[116]

In actual fact, women's rise to positions of leadership in the Reform movement was a slow progress. According to Jacob Rader Marcus, this process began with the extension of congregational membership to widows and unmarried women; then came synagogue voting rights for all women. By the second decade of the twentieth century, women were gaining access to religious school committees and in some instance to synagogue boards. Women began to serve as delegates to the UAHC biennial conventions as early as 1896.[117]

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[116] Hirsch, My Religion, 179; Kohler Papers 13/5, AJA; JR, February 5, 1886,13 both cited in Michael Meyer's Response to Modernity 285

[117] Marcus, J.R The American Jewish Woman 2: 295-98

New World, New Women

As the twentieth century dawned, the public role of women in communal leadership became more pronounced. With the influx of over a million immigrants from Eastern Europe, the American Jewish community entered a new era, with profound implications for Jewish gender roles. As Jonathan Sarna argues:

> "In response to the manifold crises of the day, particularly assimilation and immigration, responsibility for "saving Judaism" came increasingly to rest on the shoulders of women. Just as in Protestantism, so too in Judaism religion became "feminized." The home, the synagogue, and philanthropic social work came increasingly to be seen as part of women's domain, especially among Reform Jews. As a result, women became significant players in the campaign to revitalize Judaism to meet the needs of a new era."[118]

These changes for women first took the form of service, both in the form of fundraising and direct social work. Through what Sarna calls "sisterhoods of service", Jewish women extended their sphere into new realms aimed at combating the social crisis created by the massive influx of poor immigrants. From within a synagogue setting, women's groups formed to provide relief, home visits, nursing, religious schooling, industrial and domestic education, day-care, kindergartens, summer camps, and employment bureaus dedicated to the improvement of Jewish immigrants and the poor. These efforts harnessed the energies of Jewish women in ways that synagogues never had before. The National Council of Jewish Women emerged as a non-synagogue based outlet for women's activism, and women also assumed key roles in the growth of American Zionism, particularly through the flagship Jewish women's organization, Hadassah.

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[118] Sarna, J. 142

The early work of women's communal leadership, in sisterhoods, NCJW, and Hadassah, was conspicuously outward looking. After World War I, following the professionalization of social work as a largely male occupation, sisterhood women who had formerly visited the poor in their homes were encouraged to shift their energies "from the tumultuous streets of immigrant neighborhoods to the decorous pews and vestry rooms of their own synagogues."[119] Within synagogue buildings of all denominations, women initially assumed familiar domestic tasks: housekeeping, decorating, entertaining, and serving as hostesses; they helped raise funds for the synagogues, though typically they had only a limited (if any) say in the allocation of those funds; and they remained wildly successful. The National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, organized by the UAHC in 1913, was so successful that in 1926, the Union actually boasted more affiliated women's organizations that it did congregations[120]. The synagogue was becoming increasingly accessible to women, and some synagogue functions, particularly those connected to children or social gathering, could to large degree begin to be characterized as "women's space".

While not in the vanguard of most of the changes in Jewish gender roles, by the middle of the twentieth century, their impact was beginning to be felt in Conservative synagogues as well. By 1941, in the context of the ongoing debate about mixed seating, the Law Committee of the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly had recognized that "the prevailing attitude about the place of woman in modern society is

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[119] Meyer, M. 299
[120] Herman, Felicia. "From Priestess to Hostess" 170-171

making it increasingly difficult to maintain the traditional policy of isolation towards women in the synagogue."[121]

The mass migration to the suburbia following World War II was a time of enormous growth, even domination, for the Conservative movement in American Jewish life. The rise of Judaism in the suburbs was, according to Albert Gordon, marked by "the ascendance of a new type of formal Jewish community, the child-oriented one" in contrast with the "traditional Jewish community, which may be described as adult-oriented"[122]. Many of the young parents moving to the suburbs were the children of immigrants, and had grown up in urban neighborhoods where it was easy to be saturated with Judaism by association. In moving to new planned communities outside these cities, these young families were faced, often for the first time, with the need to affirmatively choose to affiliate with the organized Jewish community, and the location they chose was the synagogue. The suburban synagogue was, as Hasia Diner describes, a new hybrid organization:

> The synagogue was now not so much a house of prayer as the new Jewish neighborhood, where middle-class men and women could find for themselves and convey to their children the sense of peoplehood and belonging that they had simply absorbed from the air when they were young. It became a way of identifying as a Jew and establishing a respectable Jewish presence in their new, non-Jewish hometowns. To accomplish these tasks, the suburban synagogues chose to emphasize from the vast array of Jewish culture and religion, a symbolic shorthand, a set of observances and customs that preserved a sense of Jewishness and harmonized with suburban modernity: Hanukkah, Passover, the High Holy Days, Hebrew school and Bar (and Bat) Mitzvah.[123]

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[121] Golinkin (ed.) Proceedings of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, 3:1061
[122] Gordon, A,. Jews in Suburbia 64
[123] Diner, H. & Benderly, B. Her Works Praise Her 369

The movement these suburban pioneers often chose was Conservative, which for many struck the right balance between traditional Orthodoxy, which was "too Jewish" and Reform, which was "not Jewish enough".[124] Lacking Orthodoxy's insistence on an unchanging tradition and Reform's rejection of the validity of halacha, Conservatism attempted to adapt to modern circumstances while maintaining halachic justification without proclaiming an overarching proto-feminist ideology, and this seemed to be the right message for the times.

Largely parallel to the changes initiated by Reform Jewish women a generation earlier, women in Conservative synagogues began make their presence felt within their congregations, while also experiencing a heightened sense of religious status within them, principally as a result of mixed seating. In Conservative synagogues in suburbia, mixed seating was the norm, though still not universally adopted. This strong trend was one of the most significant features which distinguished Conservative synagogues them from their Orthodox counterparts.

While mixed seating was symbolic of women's emancipation, their actual freedom remained limited. The handling and reading of Torah scrolls was still generally reserved for men, and during the High Holy Days, when more men came to pray, "the exclusion of females from the pulpit was almost complete"[125] But even so, Sarna cites a synagogue in Park Forest, Illinois as emblematic of the "sexual role shift that was beginning to take place in Conservative congregations, as "women began to

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[124] Diner & Benderly, 368
[125] Sklare, M. Conservative Judaism 88-89

replace men as the dominant presence within the synagogue's portals." He points out that, while men continued to monopolize political and financial leadership, women carried out most of the social and organizational activities not handled by the rabbi.[126]

Though the changes were much slower than in areas of lay leadership, the role of women in public ritual in liberal (Reform and Conservative) synagogues was beginning to shift too. The Reform movement had long prided itself that within the synagogue the greater equality of women was visible not merely in the family pew, but also in the co-ed ceremony of Confirmation. At Confirmation, both male and female teenage confirmands read from the Torah scroll and participated fully in all aspects of the ceremony.[127] But it was the widespread, grassroots adoption of the ceremony of Bat Mitzvah, originated by Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, a professor at the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary and the founder of Reconstructionism, which represented the first significant beachhead on the bimah for liberal Jewish women.

The first Bat Mitzvah, of Kaplan's daughter, Judith, took place in 1922. The ceremony was initially slow to catch on, but once it got going, an unstoppable momentum began. By the 1940's, Bat Mitzvah experienced rapid growth largely as an educational spur, "a means of bringing girls into the serious study of Hebrew and Jewish texts"[128]. For some, the ceremony, as an equal parallel to the coming-of-age ceremony for boys, also served as a symbol of equality. Though for most women this marked a first and last appearance, the ritual aspects of the ceremony, the reading of

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[126] Sarna, J. 286
[127] Meyer, Michael. Response to Modernity 285
[128] Stein, R. *"The Road to Bat Mitzvah in America"* 229

Torah and haftarah, delivering divrei Torah, and the regular presence of young girls on the bimah subtly legitimated adult female participation in the synagogue. For many women who would later be in the vanguard of those pushing for further changes in the status of women within their synagogues, their moments on the pulpit at their bat mitzvah served as a touchstone for the full equality they sought.

As a further sign of the change that was such a long time coming, by the 1940's, some Conservative synagogues began to call women en masse to the Torah on the festival of Simchat Torah, a mirror of the tradition of every man being called for an aliyah during the festival. Finally in 1954 the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly resolved itself in favor of regulations "leading to the complete equalization of the status of women in Jewish law." A year later, the Committee on Law and Standards accepted as legitimate a minority opinion that women were permitted to be called to the Torah on a regular basis.[129] These rulings were in concert with similar policies already in place in the Reform movement, but because of the unique nature of the Conservative movement, individual congregations could chose the degree to which they incorporated these innovations. The ground was now laid in liberal Jewish America for the coming major battle of gender equality: women rabbis.

New World, New Rabbis

Women's ordination became the focus and symbol of feminist demands for change in the late twentieth century. Traditionally, the rabbinate had always been a

[129] Golinkin, D. 3:1086-1108

male preserve, and, after the inroads towards gender equality elaborated above, remained the final and most stubborn preserve of masculine hegemony in Judaism. As Jonathan Sarna describes, "As teachers, preachers, and community leaders- part prophet, part priest, part judge- rabbis considered themselves links in an unbroken chain of tradition handed down from one great man to the next, beginning with Moses ('our rabbi'), who had himself received the Torah from God."[130] A few exceptional women became learned in Torah through the years, and some even became teachers and lay leaders revered for their piety and wisdom, but none until the twentieth century ever held the title of rabbi. More often, rabbinically inclined women became rebbetzins, the wives of rabbis. They married what they wanted to be.

One woman, Ray (Rachel) Frank, a Jewish, socially conservative preacher, achieved celebrity status on the West Coast during the 1890s when she preached to Reform and Orthodox congregations, gave brilliant lectures to Jews and Gentiles, and on more than one occasion officiated at High Holiday services.[131] On the question of female rabbis, Frank declaimed, "Give us congregational singing which comes direct from the heart and ascends as a tribute to God. . . . Give us simplicity in our rabbi, sympathy with things which practically concern us, give us earnestness, and our synagogues will no longer mourn in their loneliness." Frank was known as "the Girl Rabbi", had no formal religious training, and faded into obscurity by the turn of the century.

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[130] Sarna, J. 340

[131] Clar, Reva and William M. Kramer, *"The Girl Rabbi of the Golden West"* 99-111, 223-36, 336-51

Frank was an exceptional case, but the question of whether women might themselves become ordained rabbis remained a lively issue in late nineteenth-century American Jewish newspapers. As Pamela Nadell points out in her book, Women Who Would Be Rabbis:

> "For a century the women who wanted to be rabbis and their supporters invented over and over again the same arguments to prove that women were worthy, that they were capable, that they were serious, that they could learn, and that they should use their knowledge to become rabbis, teachers, and preachers."[132]

Opposition to female rabbis would often stem from the attitude that women could see beyond the circumscribed horizons of traditional gender roles. They would claim that there were very few, if any, women suited for the task; that even if there were such women, they would meet with ridicule if they attempted to become rabbis; and that no one would hire them anyway. They also would say that while Judaism had survived other radical innovations, they did not believe "our people" ready for this one; it constituted too severe a break with the past. Some would allude to the fact that women in the pulpit would feminize the profession, endangering the status and reputation of men who continued to choose this career.

The responses to these arguments also began to take familiar shape. Nineteenth and early twentieth century proponents of admitting women to the rabbinate argued that in this modern world, all professions, including the rabbinate, should be open to women. Such female exclusion was not only unjust, it damaged the profession, for women with their unique perspectives, could understand female issues

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[132] Nadell, Pamela S. Women Who Would Be Rabbis xiii

and problems far better than the men who now had the sole responsibility for the ministry. Ministering to others, rather than standing outside of the woman's proper sphere, was integral to it. In fact, women as a group were perhaps uniquely better suited to the American rabbinate, focused as it was on ministry and pastoral responsibilities. While suggestive, these early arguments failed to carry the day.

Clamorous debate broke out among Reform Jewish leaders in the early 1920s when a female student, Martha Neumark, whose father served on the HUC faculty, petitioned for the right to serve a High Holy Day congregation. The Central Conference of American Rabbis passed a resolution declaring that "women cannot justly be denied the privilege of ordination,"[133] but Hebrew Union College's Board of Governors reserved for itself the final word: "no change" it decided, "should be made in the present practice". Though at least four other women attended American rabbinical schools during the interwar years, none of them was ordained, and only one actually completed the course. Some twenty-six Protestant denominations had agreed to ordain women by that time.

The ordination of women in Reform circles was not entirely without precedent. In Germany in 1935, the world's first woman Reform rabbi, Regina Jonas, received private ordination after completing a full course of study at the Berlin Reform seminary known as the Hochschule, where Leo Baeck taught and Abraham Joshua Heschel received his second ordination. But in the absence of any groundswell of support for the ordination of women from within the American Jewish community,

[133]Preisand, Sally. Judaism and the New Woman 62

and with no reason to fear that Judaism's image in the wider world would suffer should the rabbinate remain exclusively male, even Reform rabbinical seminaries in America decided to play it safe. The question of women's ordination in Judaism remained theoretical until women in the late twentieth century thrust the issue to the forefront.

The Triumph of Neutral (But Where Did Every Body Go?)

The rise of second-wave feminism blew the question of gender equity in Judaism wide open. Rebelling against the idea that men should dominate society, governing a woman's place and body, feminists spoke of the need for equality and liberation. They argued women "belong to a subordinate group; that they have suffered wrongs as a group; that their condition of subordination is not natural, but socially determined; that they must join with other women to remedy these wrongs; and finally, that they must and can provide an alternate vision of societal organization in which women as well as men will enjoy autonomy and self-determination."[134]

Jewish women played a disproportionate role among the leaders and theorists of the American feminist movement. Quickly these women turned the lens of feminist critique onto Judaism. In concert with earlier patterns, the feminist challenge to traditional Jewish patriarchy was grappled with on an organizational level first in the Reform and Reconstructionist movements, while the institutional Conservative

[134] Nadell and Sarna, eds. Women and American Judaism 11

movement (though not individuals within it) was somewhat slower to engage with the issue.

Among Reform congregations, between 1956 and 1970 the percentage of congregation which had elected women to their board rose from 72 to 96 percent. By the 1950's there were already a few congregations with women presidents; in 1973, when such presidencies were no longer unusual, the UAHC elected its first woman vice chairman. Under the influence of the feminist movement, Reform Judaism supported the Equal Rights Amendment and women's freedom to obtain abortions. Its textbooks began to present female role models other than mothers and teachers and Sisterhoods adapted their programs to the rising percentage of working women.[135]

The debate over the specific question of the ordination of women was qualitatively different from the struggle for equality in lay leadership. Through it, fundamental presumptions about the nature and future viability of liberal Judaism were grappled with. For traditionalists, it seemed inconceivable, not to mention deeply threatening, that women could be ordained "teachers and preachers in Israel". On the surface, there was no precedence for this in Jewish law, and very little support in Jewish tradition. For those who rooted their Jewish lives and identities in the twin authorities of halacha and minhag, women rabbis were an anathema. But the halachic and moral toehold feminist advocates needed lay in the unique nature of the American rabbinate itself. As Beth Wegner points out:

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[135] Meyer, M. 380

> "The modern rabbi, for good or for ill, and perhaps for good and for ill, is a *novum* in Jewish experience. It is therefore not at all astonishing that the subject of the ordination of women is not discussed in traditional sources, because past generations never contemplated the possibility. To offer an extreme analogy, nowhere to we encounter a discussion whether Martians are obligated to put on tefillin or are required to observe Noahide laws"[136]

It was this insight that provided the opening for all that was to follow.

It was the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (NFTS), led by the redoubtable Jane Evans, who were the first to act, calling for the ordination of women early in the 1960's, just as women activists were renewing their demands for the equality of women in all the professions. Herself a major voice in the later debate in the Conservative movement, Anne Lapidus Lerner articulated the feelings of the time:

> "The woman of today is different from the woman of the second, or even the nineteenth, century. In polite company, at least, women's religious or intellectual capabilities are no longer called into question. Due to a longer life expectancy, lower birth-rate and lower infant mortality, childbearing and nursing no longer occupy as large a portion or proportion of a woman's life. "Parenting", involving both parents, is replacing "mothering" as a description of the child-nurturing role. Women hold high positions in virtually all areas of public life. Their goals, like those of men, include careers of service to God and fellowpersons. If, as has been argued, there is no halachic barrier, on what grounds can we exclude capable, committed women from the rabbinate?"[137]

Growing numbers of women were becoming leaders in Reform Jewish youth activities during the 1960s, some attending Hebrew Union College classes as undergraduates, and a few dreamed of being rabbis. One of these, Sally J. Preisand, with the support of the college's president, Nelson Glueck, and the Reform movement's top leadership, was finally ordained amid great media fanfare in 1972. Preisand was America's first ordained female rabbi, followed two years later by the

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[136] Gordis, Robert *"On the Ordination of Women"* 1
[137] Lapidus-Lerner, Anne *"On the Rabbinic Ordination of Women"* 6

first Reconstructionist woman rabbi, Sandy Eisenberg Sasso. By the year 2000, the Reform movement in the United States had ordained 335 women rabbis, the Reconstructionist movement, 98.[138]

On the Conservative front, Ezrat Nashim, an organization of Jewishly knowledgeable, young Conservative women appeared uninvited at the 1972 Rabbinical Assembly convention and presented the following demands, which are an eloquent and pithy summation of the remaining issues in the quest for gender equity in liberal Judaism:

> "It is time that: women be granted membership in synagogues, women be counted in the minyan, women be allowed full participation in religious observances (including being called to the Torah, reading the Torah, and leading the chanting of prayers); women be recognized as witnesses before Jewish law; women be allowed to initiate divorce; women be permitted and encouraged to attend Rabbinical and Cantorial schools, and to perform Rabbinical and Cantorial functions in synagogues; women be encouraged to join decision making bodies, and to assume professional leadership roles, in synagogues and in the general Jewish community; women be considered as bound to fulfill all mitzvoth equally with men."[139]

For Conservative Jews, the path to women's ordination proved far more torturous. As one vocal advocate at the Seminary for women's ordination framed the debate in the Conservative movement:

> "We stand on the threshold of the 1980's, embroiled in a controversy the ramifications of which touch our religious, scholarly, professional and personal lives. We are being asked to make a change, a change which is perceived by some as a radical break with tradition; by others, as a long-overdue extension of the rights and responsibilities of Judaism to its women, the majority of the Jewish people."[140]

Committed simultaneously to Jewish tradition and to change, the movement found itself painfully divided. Some, like renowned Talmudist and Jewish

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[138] Nadell & Sarna (eds.) Women and American Judaism 305
[139] Hyman, Paula *"Ezrat Nashim and the Emergence of a New Jewish Feminism"* 284-295
[140] Lapidus-Lerner, A. 1

Theological Seminary professor Saul Lieberman, insisted that Jewish law on the issue was unshakable: "Since a woman is not fit to judge (issues of Jewish law) and she cannot become qualified for this, she cannot be ordained"[141].

In spite of the powerful voices in favor of maintaining the traditional position, momentum in favor of accepting women for training and ordination at the Jewish Theological Seminary was building. David Roskies lays out the philosophical basis of the affirmative argument:

> "Now if we assume a non-apocalyptic view of the world, and if we assume, as I do, that on the specific issue of women, it is Judaism that has been lax and unresponsive while Feminism has unleashed a vast reservoir of creativity and commitment then what follows is a creative betrayal of tradition in the name of this new and vital force. If we believe, furthermore, that the synagogue, not the golf course, not the community center or the B'nai Brith lodge is the dynamic focus of Jewish life, then the synagogue must be an arena for women to assume leadership positions to channel this energy into the pulpit rabbinate is not to subvert Judaism but to Judaize Feminism."[142]

Considering the make-up of Ezrat Nashim, this is a rather ludicrous goal. These women were highly educated, highly committed Jews already. They did not need to be "judaized". However, the larger argument still stands.

There were practical arguments in favor of women's ordination as well. Advocates argued that the ordination of women by the Conservative movement would address the movement's credibility problem with its own laity. By the 1970s, the Conservative movement, which had exploded in popularity during the early period of suburbanization, was developing an image problem. It was seen as stodgy, inflexible, and incapable of successfully meeting the challenges of the day, especially feminism.

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[141] Allen, Wayne. Tomeikh KaHalacha 22
[142] Roskies, David G. *"A Brief Position Paper on the Ordination of Women"*

The Reform movement was in ascendance, but within some Conservative circles, it was hoped that:

> "A decision to ordain women will prove that, faced with complex problems, halacha can come up with an answer within a reasonable length of time. We will have opened to us a new source of capable, committed and talented rabbinic leadership. The problem (of ordaining women) will have been finally resolved, allowing us to turn our attention to the more important tasks which lie before us. It also gives a signal to the young, committed products of our movement...that we are open to change, to diversity, and finally to offering once again a dynamic program of traditional Judaism. The level of observance among our laity is appalling. In addition to the problem of aging membership, we must face the need to convert our nominal membership into a meaningful membership. To do this we must show them that halacha has credibility, that it can function in this time and on the continent. Then, we can begin to develop the approaches and resources to spread our view of traditional Judaism to the members of our synagogues."[143]

Others, like the distinguished Conservative rabbi and scholar, Robert Gordis, concurred, arguing that "both on ethical and on pragmatic grounds, taking into account the crying needs of Jewish life and the call for equal opportunity...(women's) ordination is highly desirable". As for the female candidates themselves,

> "The women contemplating the conservative rabbinate are deeply committed to halacha and Jewish learning. They come with a new sensitivity, a new perspective, perhaps even a new language with which to reinterpret the Jewish experience. To dress this exotic creature in a tallit and to place her on the pulpit is to my mind as potentially exciting a role model as Maimonides' rabbi-as-philosopher and the Baal Shem Tov's rabbi-as-zaddik."[144]

Plaintive letters to the leadership of the Rabbinical Assembly, the Seminary, and United Synagogue from young, well-educated Conservative Jewish women eager to enter the rabbinate, as well as a perceptible movement of such women to Reform and Reconstructionist seminaries, led to worries about a "real loss in man (woman)

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[143] Lapidus-Lerner, A.13-14
[144] Roskies, D.

power for our movement."[145] Yet the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Gerson Cohen, feared with good reason that an outright policy of ordination would tear the Conservative movement apart.

For a decade (1972-1983) Conservative leaders "engaged in an intricate political dance of shifting alliances, studies undertaken, commissions formed, hearings held, motions tabled, and votes counted."[146] But while their leaders debated, revolutionary changes in the status of women rocked Conservative synagogues across the country. Synagogues began to count women for minyan and call women up to the Torah, and many women assumed traditionally male ritual responsibilities. The debate over women's ordination continued until 1983 when, faced with the threat that the Rabbinical Assembly would preempt the seminary and admit women to the ranks of the Conservative rabbinate on its own, the seminary faculty voted thirty-four to eight "that Jewish women be admitted to the Rabbinical School of the Jewish Theological Seminary as candidates for ordination as rabbis". Several faculty members left the seminary in protest, but the movement largely weathered the storm. By 2000, the Conservative seminaries had ordained almost one hundred and fifty women, and gender equality, dubbed "traditional egalitarianism" became an accepted part of the Conservative movement's ethos.[147]

With new consciousness raised by the women's movement and with the full equal rights of women firmly established within the synagogue, liberal Jews became

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[145] Greenberg, S (ed.) The Ordination of Women as Rabbis 65
[146] Nadell, P. 193
[147] Wegner, "The Politics of Women's Ordination" 514

sensitized to gender issues imbedded more subtly in liturgical language and traditional rituals.

Individual congregations, and then the Reform and Reconstructionist movements, began experimenting with the liturgy itself, trying to modify the overwhelmingly masculine language that had since ancient times been the Jewish path to the divine[148]. Translators strained to construct sentences without the gendered pronouns. Worshippers now appealed to their heavenly "Parent", rather than "Father", praised the "Sovereign" rather than "King" of the universe, and invoked the names of the matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel along with their patriarch husbands, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

But as Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative women strove to be men's religious equals, they increasingly noticed that they were not their spiritual equals.[149] Not only in issues of liturgy, but in law and ritual, Judaism had for millennia ignored certain profound experiences central to women's lives. Beginning in the 1970s, before synagogue equality was won, women began to compose prayer and ceremonies drawn from female lives to sanctify their deepest moments, to bless events and feelings that the prayer book ignored—in effect to reinvent the rich female spirituality that had vanished during the passage to the New World and transition into modernity. Embodied Judaism will be examined in more depth in the next chapter.

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[148] This debate remains an open and ongoing issue today in the Conservative movement.
[149] Diner & Benderly, 416

Over the course of the twentieth century, within the ritual and leadership life of the American liberal synagogue, everything which had once been the exclusive province of men, what the rabbis of earlier times had used to define Jewish masculinity, was now equally open to men and women alike. What the rabbis understood as Jewish womanhood, defined largely by what women were excluded from, effectively no longer existed. The liberal movements' response to the challenge of feminism was egalitarianism, which ideally endows all Jewish adults with the same obligations and privileges, thus rendering all Jewish adults the same. In the place of the rabbinic male-female binary, all Jewish adults in the liberal setting have the same religious opportunities and obligations. Nothing in liberal Judaism is barred because of one's gender.

And yet, as much as this explosion of the gender binary seems to represent a paradigm shift in Jewish life, in significant ways, very little has actually changed. "Gender-neutral" is anything but neutral. While the rabbis of old were certainly concerned with how to contain the danger that women, as adults without legal autonomy, presented to the rabbinic system, their primary constituency of interest was always Jewish men. All of the activities and roles in the synagogue were developed for men, and women who seek an active role in synagogue life adopt roles and responsibilities designed by and for men. While contemporary synagogue sanctuaries are fairly de-sexualized spaces, in a ritual sense, everyone in them is coded

"neuter-male". The unintended outcome of egalitarianism is that women (and men) check their gender at the synagogue door.

Chapter 4

Beyond Gender-Neutral

"What is it that we wish to renew?
Is it Judaism, ossified after centuries of enforced isolation,
Or is it Americanism, grown fat and self-indulgent
After decades of untrammeled growth?"

David G. Roskies[150]

"And My House shall be called a House of Prayer for all peoples."

Isaiah 56:7

I Once Was Lost—The Necessary Sacrifice of Gender

The preceding chapters, have demonstrated the profound shift in women's roles in Judaism in the modern age, from outsiders to male rabbinic centers of power and status to a reasonable approximation of equality. In the liberal movements, Jewish women now enjoy full equity of access to education, ritual, leadership, and authority. The problem, is that women are welcome to assume these roles on the condition that they also don a mask of gender-neutrality, leaving, as much as possible, their female, embodied selves, at the synagogue door.

I recognized this problem first through my personal experience. As a rabbinical student, even at a seminary with an increasing majority of female students, I have spent five years trying to become "one of the boys". I have been immersed in the

[150] Roskies, David G. "A Brief Position Paper on the Ordination of Women" in On the Ordination of Women as Rabbis: *Position Papers of the Faculty of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America*

world of Jewish texts, trained to officiate ancient and honored rituals, developed my skills as a leader of prayer. Part of what has been exciting about this process is the transgressive nature of my role: I am entering once-forbidden territory, doing what my grandmothers might never have dreamed of, and I belong here.

At the same time, I am often frustrated by my own invisibility in the very world I am embracing as both a profession and a calling. An example: in a class on Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah: Hilchot Tshuvah*, the laws of repentance, we studied his description of the World To Come. In the Rambam's vision of Paradise, those men who merit reward will study Torah with the sages for eternity. I asked the professor, "What happens to women who merit reward?" He was nonplussed for a moment, and then replied, "What you have to understand, Miss Oleon, is that it doesn't matter. It never would have occurred to Maimonides to think about women; they just didn't count." I wondered, "Didn't he have a mother, a wife, daughters? In all of the time Rambam spent thinking about what happened after Jews died, it never occurred to him to wonder about what would happen to half of them?" "No," he responded definitively, "That just wasn't his concern. Though, now that I think of it, Maimonides did say that a righteous woman would be her husband's footstool in Paradise. That's her reward."

That's her reward! A dubious distinction for modern women with university educations, successful careers, and families to raise. Clearly no one's footstool, our other option is to be one of the men at the table. And so here I sit, with all Jewish

women who know themselves to be more than part of the furniture. This is the partial triumph of feminism: no one begrudges our right to the seat, as long as we come dressed Yentl-like, our womanhood hidden in plain view.

The age-old thought of the Bar Mitzvah boy is "Today, I am a man". And indeed, in terms of Jewish ritual and responsibility, he is. By reading and teaching Torah, by leading the community in prayer, a thirteen year old demonstrates that he is ready to take his place in the ranks of Jewish men extending back to Moshe Rabbeinu (our teacher) and Avraham Avinu (our father). When a girl becomes Bat Mitzvah, demonstrating the same skills, accepting the same responsibilities, she too is saying "Today I am a man." She is taking her place as a Jewish adult, but there is nothing in her training, her learning, or her ritual that indicates in any way that she is different from her male counterpart. Nothing prepares her for a destiny that is in any way different from his. She dons tallit, kippah, perhaps even tefillin, garb that, in addition to circumcision, has marked men's bodies as "Jew" for millennia. She accepts with joy, pride, and perhaps some trepidation her new status as adult Jew. In some ways she is now radically more visible than she has ever been. But as her rabbi, as her female rabbi, I cannot help but think about the ways in which she herself will now become invisible. No longer banished to a balcony or behind a mechitza, as a woman in "gender-neutral" territory, she remains hidden in plain sight. In the liberal American synagogue at the turn of the twenty-first century, we have all become "men", and we have all of us, men and women, lost something in the translation.

Part of what has been lost is a sense of ourselves as gendered individuals in a Jewish context. The socio-anthropological impact of shifting gender roles in American Judaism is that while Jewish space is largely perceived to have become women's space, the women in it are ritually men. But on the way to equality in the synagogue, many of the particular expressions of women's piety, like tkhines and mikveh, were deemed anachronistic and discarded. In opening the traditional "men's space" in Jewish life, Jewish men have experienced real loss too. Largely dissipated is the fraternal experience of the synagogue and Torah learning, and men who are active in Jewish life must now compete for leadership and status with women. I don't mention these changes with nostalgia—Judaism must evolve if it is to stay relevant, and gender equity is by and large a fabulous, positive development. I mention them only to acknowledge that while the direction of progress has been good, real losses have taken place too, and some of the things we discarded to lighten the load on our headlong rush into modernity might prove more valuable to carry into the future than we thought. Finally, for both men and women, beyond the ritual of brit milah (circumcision), there remains little in liberal Jewish liturgical or ritual life that acknowledges any of us as physical beings. Liberal Jewish life has become a largely disembodied experience—a life of the mind and spirit. But as human beings, we experience much of our lives through our very creatureliness, and if our religion cannot speak to our whole selves, we are missing many opportunities for connection. And so both men and women are alienated.

In the past, even the very recent past, gender and embodiedness may have seemed more like obstacles to Jewish success in America than assets. Shifting gender roles in Judaism have been one of the major vehicles through which Jews in this country have worked through the process of Americanization. As Riv-Ellen Prell puts the problem,

> "The inescapable fact is that Jews, like other minorities, carry a double burden in that they represent to a dominant culture what it reviles, while they also attach those castigations to themselves along the divide of gender. As Americans looked upon Jews as marginal, obsessed with women, uncivil, and unworthy of citizenship, Jewish men and middle class Jews projected those very images on Jewish women and the working class. Similarly, as Jews negotiated the rapid and difficult move into the middle class and beyond, the burdens of that mobility were represented not in terms of the class, but rather as the demands or obsessions of a spouse and a mother. Undesirable qualities, whether they were 'excessively American' or 'excessively Jewish', were most often attributed to females. The stereotypes integrated the economic aspects of upward mobility and acculturation experienced by Jews with the ongoing attitudes of the dominant culture toward them. The relationship between Jew's growing access to the wider culture and the increasingly strident images of Jewish women suggest that Jews may well feel that the price of admission to America is a rejection of critical aspects of oneself as a Jew. Projected onto mothers, wives, lovers, and partners are the loathsome and unacceptable qualities of affluence constantly represented as Jewish rather than middle class."[151]

Gender has thus been the ground on which Jews, and especially Jewish men, have worked out their hyphenated identity. Several scholars I encountered in researching this paper pointed to this as a pattern that occurs in almost every generation[152]. Over and over again, we work out our identities as Americans, as men and women, and as Jews, in reflection and sometimes in opposition to each other.

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[151] Prell, Riv-Ellen. Fighting to Become Americans 13

[152] See Jonathan Sarna's American Judaism and Riv-Ellen Prell's Fighting To Become Americans

This anxiety about identity is not only around gender images, but also over questions of access and domination in Jewish space. At several points in American Jewish history there has been anxiety that women are "taking over" and that men have "disappeared" from synagogue life. By way of illustration, we can examine the last flowering of this trend, during the massive suburbanization of the American Jewish community in the middle of the twentieth century[153]. According to Prell, during the period of suburbanization, Jewish women having too much 'power' was commonly used as an explanation for the persistence of problems in the Jewish community and family. These problems included preoccupation with status, sons' alienation from their fathers and domination by their mothers, and Jews' diminished religious practices. Commentators of the day argued that, "The Jewish family had lost its traditional patriarchal focus, confusing its children."[154] This thinking echoes the contemporary debate about whether women are crowding out men in Jewish leadership, fear of high intermarriage rates, and nascent conversations about male empowerment. To many feminists, such conversations feel absurd. Women have barely achieved even an approximation of equity after thousands of years of the benevolent despotism of Jewish patriarchy. How could it already be time to think about "male empowerment"? These critics aren't wrong; I just feel we do not have the luxury to focus on only one gender at a time anymore.

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[153] For this analysis, I rely heavily on Riv-Ellen Prell's Fighting To Become Americans, which should be consulted for a more complete insight to the period.
[154] Prell, R. 151

Prell points out that the Jewish woman's increasing importance in the mid-century synagogue was parallel to, and as problematic as, her power in the family. She cites the writer Albert Gordon, who claims that suburban Jewish women "lacked sufficient religious education to serve as a lay leader" and that "her dominant role is not a healthy condition for the synagogue"[155]. Contemporary observers most often presented women's dominant role in suburban Jewish life as an accident that women took advantage of, rather than one motivated by articulate values and ideas of their own. At their most neutral, Jewish sociologists of suburbia noted that women's commitment to Jewish communal life represented a fundamental transformation in Jewish values. With men abandoning their traditional roles and women taking them over, most commentators foresaw disaster for the Jewish community[156].

The suburban Jewish family encoded many of the contradictory experiences of suburbia for Jews, much as the family has at every phase of Jewish life in America. Jews' growing economic success led to access to middle-class American life. At the same time they continued to feel closed out of a variety of opportunities available to others in their class. As Prell points out,

> "Jewish men and women experienced this duality differently. Jewish men's opportunities were expanding, and both occupations and work places, their defining arena, were broadening men's expectations for success and social life. Women, by contrast, embodied the triptych of Jewish suburban life—family, consumption, and synagogue. The structural separation between men and women linked their genders to their different experiences of Jewishness, the middle class, and the economy. As managers of the private sphere, Jewish women, even when they were activists in their communities, synagogues, and often politics, represented family and Judaism. Jewish men continued to personify the successful provider. On behalf of their families Jewish

[155] Prell, R. 153
[156] Ibid. 154

> women 'wanted', while they maintained the family's collective Jewishness, and Jewish men were cast as marginal to virtually anything beyond 'providing'. Not all Jewish men succeeded economically, but in their success or failures, their productive role, reflecting the values of the period, was the sign of their Americanization."[157]

Gender conflict in Jewish life was not only rooted in anxiety about the changing role of women. For Americans, Jews and non-Jews alike, images of masculinity and work in particular were changing. In the first part of the twentieth century, according to Prell,

> "Men's dominance in the workforce became the source of expectations about their wages and occupations as well. The early twentieth century American economy was built on the expectation of a "family wage" earned by men. The male wage earner increasingly became the "natural" state of masculinity in the United States, and the failure to realize that state threatened to make women into men and men into women."[158]

By the middle of the century, growing acceptance of Jewish men in traditionally gentile-dominated business fields and the increasing centrality of work in male identity formation contributed to both the perception and the fact of an absence of men in communal leadership, which in turn led to female dominance in Jewish life. The postwar period offered dramatically different opportunities for Jewish men than the interwar years had offered. During the war years and thereafter, education increasingly served men as an important foundation for success and occupational mobility. Jews of both generations shared the desire for sons to achieve mobility and to enjoy higher status jobs. The series of choices that led Jewish male workers from the factory to the trades and offices, and then to management and professionalization,

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[157] Prell, R. 169
[158] Ibid. 106

suggested a high consensus about the status and meaning of work. Suburban Jewish fathers and their sons, then, anticipated that work and success would be their primary focus[159], and a perceived vacuum emerged in communal leadership.

The impact of these changes on Jewish communal life was quickly felt. Anxiety about the inequality between men and women seemed to grip social scientists and rabbis of the day. Ironically, Jewish men's absence was a problem of home and synagogue life because they were *not* present. But Jewish women were dangerous because they *were* present. Active and committed to the life of their children and community, and in keeping with the mores of their day, discouraged from employment outside the home, women were continually represented as the problem in the Jewish family and in the synagogue. Jewish women were encoded as usurpers of power and excessive consumers in their suburban life[160], and their prominent place in the synagogue and other Jewish communal institutions was incorrectly perceived as both "new" and "unnatural".

"But Now Am Found"—Towards Re-Gendering Liberal Judaism

The struggle for most American Jews in the middle of the twentieth century was how to establish themselves securely in the middle class with a Judaism that was palatable in their new suburban setting. In the second half of the century, that goal

[159] Prell, R. 172
[160] Prell, R. 173

has been accomplished, to a truly remarkable degree. This success engendered new problems as well. Now fully accepted as "white" Americans, Jewish men and women were free to acquire educations and occupational achievements corresponding closely to other (white) American elites. The Jewish family has become a dual career unit directly in response to the rise of second wave feminism, women's interests in work, and the new economic reality that, particularly in metropolitan America, where the vast majority of Jews live, it now requires two incomes for middle and upper-middle class families to maintain their expected standard of living. As Prell points out, from the 1970s on, as middle class white Americans,

> "(Jewish women) were uniquely placed to take great advantage of the increasing opportunities for women in graduate and professional schools and employment. They worked, and in so doing the nature of Jewish family life began to change. As in all other dual career families, children needed care, and working women became less likely to define themselves primarily through family and voluntarism. Middle class families remained intensely child-centered, but not with mothers always at home. The result was that Jewish women could no longer be defined by the needs they served or their primary focus on family."[161]

American Jewish women have largely embraced a new role within the Jewish community in spite of new expectations on many Jewish women to work outside the home in addition to maintaining traditional gender coded responsibilities in terms of housekeeping and child-rearing[162]. As Susan Weidman Schneider, editor of *Lilith* magazine, characterizes the blossoming of women's participation in Jewish life,

> "Ever since the 1970s, a time when men were much more resistant to changes in the content and the rhythm of worship services, Jewish women have been at the forefront of creating new liturgies, ceremonies, and rituals to mark the landmarks of our lives...we see new rituals for becoming pregnant, blessing the birth of a daughter,

[161] Prell, R. 204
[162] a double-role sociologist Arlie Hoschild identifies in her book The Second Shift

> turning fifty or sixty, separating from a marriage, healing from abuse, or marking the end of cancer treatments. Women are writing psalms on healing, midrashim on biblical women, poems about their Jewish grandmothers. Forging intimate connections between traditional Judaism and the complex issues of life has helped them become more knowledgable and engaged Jews."[163]

These are developments to be celebrated, particularly as women's challenges to traditional Judaism encouraged men and women to reengage with serious questions of Jewish faith, tradition, and identity. Jewish women are creating a new place for ourselves within Judaism. Much of what is emerging speaks to the embodied experience of Jewish women, a topic long neglected by the tradition. Rituals, often incorporating mikveh, are created to acknowledge changes in women's physical and spiritual development. In a non-invasive way, we are learning to mark our bodies as Jewish space. This process of adaptation, rediscovery and invention is "re-gendering" Judaism.

But as long as the achievements re-gendering efforts remain concentrated only among women, the work is still unfinished. Instead of pointing the way towards a re-imagining of Judaism for all liberal Jews, these gains are seen as only particularist achievements and continue to be regarded by many as either marginal or threatening. Without in anyway abandoning or distracting from this important work among women, I believe that it is time to approach the next stage of the re-gendering process. Liberal Jews need to re-evaluate the role of men in American Jewish life.

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[163] Schneider, Susan. "The Reluctant Man" RJ 74

As discussed in previous chapters, when Jews lived in separate, tightly knit communities, the rabbis developed a new understanding of what it means to be a "real" Jewish man. Violence was essential prohibited for fear that the powers-that-be might take revenge on the entire vulnerable community. Violence was not accepted within the Jewish community either, lest it spill over onto our behavior outside. And so the rabbis taught: "Ezeh hu Gibor? Who is strong and a hero? He who is able to control his passions (yetzer)". Who is the real Jewish man? The talmid chacham, one who studies Torah and Talmud." Through his studies, the spiritual hero will save the Jewish people from destruction. This model of Jewish masculinity was useful in its day, and perhaps remains viable in some Orthodox communities. But for most American Jewish men, spiritual strength alone is no longer adequate as the only definition of masculinity.

We don't live in isolated communities anymore, and for most American Jewish men, the internalized model of authentic masculinity is more likely the American, rather than the Jewish, one. As Rabbi Joel Soffin describes,

> "A red-blooded American man is a protector, a provider, and a pillar. He defends his family and his community in any way necessary. He provides a good standard of living. He is independent and invulnerable. Big boys don't cry. No pain, no gain. Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing. Stand up like a man."[164]

Soffin's definition of masculinity is no more complete that the rabbis'. But he does point to a significant problem. In the twenty-first century, American Jews are more integrated and accepted into the majority culture than we have been at any

[164] Soffin, Joel. "The Real Man" in *Reform Judaism*, Fall 2006 66

previous moment in history. As Jews become increasingly comfortable as Americans, particularist Jewish identities are harder to maintain. The teenage boys in liberal synagogues today know as little about discrimination and exclusion as they do about Talmud and *yiddishkeit*. These boys go to the same schools, play the same sports, read the same books, play the same video games, date the same girls, and one day will compete for the same jobs as other non-Jewish American boys of their class. Their Jewish identity is increasingly a "plus" proposition, a supplement to their secular American identity.

I choose to see this as a neutral reality. If the issue is approached properly, American Jewish men have the potential to benefit by taking the best of both iconic masculinities, not to mention entirely new possibilities not yet imagined. From the American side, we hope that our boys grow to be strong and successful men, while from the Jewish side they continue to learn to be intelligent, vulnerable, and kind, living lives somehow rooted in Torah. However, if the synagogue is not able to respond to the changed reality of Jewish men and masculinity, if it doesn't speak both to the challenge of being American men, and to the vulnerabilities that engenders, then it's hardly surprising that the synagogue is speaking to fewer and fewer Jewish men.

As Stuart Aaronson, past-president of the Reform movement's men's auxiliary, the North American Federation of Temple Brotherhoods, frames the problem,

> "NFTB is in the process of change, just as the men of Reform Judaism are changing. Different societal expectations in both Jewish and secular worlds have led many men

> away from active participation in religion. At the same time, in numerous studies and the popular press, men are reporting a sense of anomie or social alienation. Our new Brotherhood programs – the Achim Corps Programs which focus on worship, acts of tikkun olam, and men's health issues – are designed to offer men an opportunity to connect with other men and often, in a very real way, with themselves. We are committed to leading a renewal of Jewish life for the men of our Movement. If we want our young people to become or stay involved, we can do no less for their fathers."[165]

Jeffrey Salkin points to one aspect of the problem of reaching contemporary American Jewish men-- that the organized Jewish community may be inadvertently relating to men in language that is coded for women:

> "We Reform Jews, and to a lesser extent Conservative Jews, have been engaged in an ongoing conversation about spirituality, which among other things, can be seen as a receptivity to the poetic, intuitive, or emotional side of our tradition. Sad to say, in our secular culture, it may be that this new trend toward spirituality, healing, openness, inwardness, and such seems too cloying, too feminine, for many men. If you add to this the fact that many of the public practitioners of this spirituality are in fact women, it may seem to many men that what they are really good at is no longer appreciated or needed."[166]

It is possible that exactly those innovations in Jewish life that speak to many women (and some men) and have reinvigorated their Jewish identities in the last thirty years are precisely what is driving many men (and some women) away from even "cutting-edge" mainstream congregational life.

Part of the problem may also be a question of strategic approach. The other side of the latest trend in Jewish empowerment today is very demanding of the individual. In most synagogues, no longer can a Classical Reform Jew do little more than listen, pay dues, and sit on the building committee. Now liberal congregations

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[165] Aaronson, Stuart. "A Renewal of Jewish Life for the Men of Our Movement" RJ 71
[166] Salkin, Jeffrey 70

are encouraging (even demanding) a level of Jewish and Hebrew literacy and comfort with public performance that is fairly unprecedented in liberal Jewish history. This may be especially challenging for men, as according to Salkin,

> "The whole issue of men's comfort in public is, I think, very significant. Men do not like being perceived as incompetent. You cannot take a man who is extremely competent in the workplace, a Fortune 500 executive or whatever, and put him into a situation where he's going to feel stupid. And because men don't want to be embarrassed, don't want the tensions and stress, sometimes the response is flight. It strikes me too that in the past, during the age of Classical Reform, it was easier for men. People in the pews didn't have to have expertise in Hebrew; they basically relied on the rabbi to have all the Jewish knowledge. The turning toward tradition with an expectation of Jewish literacy is a direct challenge to Jewish men who grew up in the Classical Reform tradition. When they say "I no longer feel at home in my own congregation," I think the real discomfort is with these new demands that had never been put upon them until now."[167]

I am not advocating lowering standards of participation, commitment, and religiosity in liberal synagogues. The real anxieties of transformation must be addressed head-on. If we are serious about being inclusive institutions; then we must learn to meet each congregant where they are at, with as few assumptions as possible.

Before moving to address some of the ways I think liberal Jewish institutions can be re-gendered, there is one more topic of gender conflict which must be addressed—the growing anxiety about the "feminization" of the American rabbinate. Jewish men and women are now equally present in universities and in the workplace. The demands on their time are intense, and the institutions of the Jewish community who had long relied on volunteer leadership have been slow to respond to these changes. The most common institutional response has been to professionalize what

[167] Salkin, Jeffrey 71

had formerly been laymen's (and women's) responsibilities. A growing majority of those responding to the call from Jewish training institutions, including rabbinical seminaries, communal service programs, and social work schools, are women.

I wonder if some of the anxiety about a female-dominated rabbinate reflects a disconnection between the perception of what and who a rabbi should be and the reality of the work of contemporary American congregational rabbis. Like the "pinking" of such professions as teaching and social work, part of the negative impact of women on the status of the rabbinate is that (seeing gender qualities in essentialist terms), ministry is more "natural" for women. With its growing emphasis on pastoral care, relationships, children, and "new age" personal spirituality, the modern rabbinate requires a skill set whose growth is encouraged, and therefore more commonly found, among women. This is more likely to be an exceptional set of skills and interests for men, and less likely to be reinforced by contemporary American notions of masculinity and male achievement. But when women in the rabbinate prove these are more common skills than previously thought, the sense of only the exceptional (man) being able to be a rabbi is diminished. The interest of many women strips away the rarity, and therefore some of the status, of ministry. Further complicating the picture of the modern liberal rabbinate, the job now often requires management and budgetary skills which are commonly identified with men. Hence, the larger, richer, or more complex the synagogue, the less likely it is that a woman

will head it. This contributes to a pattern whereby the lower levels of the field are occupied by women, while the higher-status roles remain dominated by men.

Of course, to be an exceptional rabbi requires more than just pastoral ability. Depth of learning, which was previously male-exclusive, but is now theoretically available to all, is of course a prerequisite. What should sustain the status of the profession ought to be the depth of learning, expertise in teaching, business and political savvy, and personal integrity of *all* of its practitioners. Even with equity of access to Jewish learning, obviously, not every woman is proficient in these skills either. Anxiety around the "decreasing status" of the rabbinate due to feminization holds. In an interview entitled "The Retreating Man", Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin articulates much the same analysis of the contemporary pulpit rabbinate:

> "For the lions of our Movement, men like Abba Hillel Silver and Stephen Wise, masculinity was demonstrated through forcefulness and social justice. But as the pastoral and spiritual elements in American synagogue life began to take center stage, public activism receded to the periphery and the qualities once esteemed in Jewish religious leadership changed. Today's rabbis are valued and valuated for skills that are quintessentially, if stereotypically, feminine. Synagogue selection committees, for example, generally seek out spiritual leaders who demonstrate the ability to relate well to different kinds of people, to be warm, accessible, inclusive. These are appropriate qualifications, but rarely do rabbinical placement listings cite scholarship or public activism as criteria."[168]

To my mind, this debate is predicated on the wrong circle of questions. Rather than ask "where did the men go?" or "why are there so many women?" in Jewish settings, what we ought to be asking ourselves is "Why are there so few options for Jewish expression and belonging (for men and for women)?" The battle of the sexes in

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[168] Salkin, Jeffrey 70

American Jewish life is played as a zero-sum game. For much of Jewish history, Jewish leadership, authority, and even public participation were the patrimony of Jewish men. Now women (rightfully) demand their right to a seat at the table, but in order to make room, we play a great game of musical chairs, everyone jockeying for too few seats. As long as there are only limited roles to fill, only a limited number of people will fill them. What we ought to be doing is figuring out how to legitimate more roles and ways of being Jewish, adding leaves to the table and pulling up enough chairs so that everyone is able to sit comfortably.

The expansion of outlets and roles in American Jewish life may take many forms. Some of these forms speak to one gender rather than the other. As Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin explains:

> "I don't know how to address (the disengagement of men from Jewish life) in a way that doesn't seem like I'm trying to cut women out. We men don't know how to do this and still be politically correct. We haven't figured out how to reenfranchise without disenfranchising; without seeming to be anti-feminist."[169]

As long as there are balanced aggregate opportunities for men and women, we must be free to create options that appeal to the specific and particular, as well as the inclusive and communal. One option is to capitalize on the increasing interest in serious Jewish learning by creating classes, curricula, and study groups dedicated to gender-specific or stage-of-life topics. Some of this work, particularly for adolescent girls, is already underway[170], but there is so much more, on aging, on marriage, on

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[169] Salkin, Jeffrey. "The Retreating Man" *RJ* 80

[170] see for example Arianna Gordon's curriculum on female adolescence and Jewish responses, and Josh Brown's work on Jewish fatherhood, both works in progress for the Rhea Hirsch School of Education at HUC-LA, to be

work, for example, still to be approached. Second, there is a great need for more voluntary men's and women's space within synagogues. Some of this takes the form of largely social outlets—sports teams, discussion groups, Sisterhoods and Brotherhoods, poker nights and mahjong tournaments. But there are ritual opportunities which should not be overlooked either. There may be a place for voluntary gender-specific prayer groups, for example. Finally, there is an enormous untapped opportunity for inclusion and connection if we are willing to expand our approach to ritual life-cycle observances. The (male) birth, Bar Mitzvah, marriage, death cycle enshrined in Jewish tradition may have been sufficient in the pre-modern period, but now does not begin to address the varied experiences we now encounter. We have more beginnings and endings now, and these transitions deserve an honored place in our Jewish consciouness every bit as much as the now artificial start of maturity celebrated at age thirteen. We ought to develop and encourage rituals for beginnings, like driving, voting, puberty, chemotherapy and for endings: menopause, divorce, recovery, retirement. Some of these moments in our lives merit public celebration or acknowledgement on the bimah. Some of these acknowledgments ought to be more private—at a mikveh, in the rabbi's study, alone before the Torah, or outdoors. But even these private moments should become part of the communal consciousness. Our congregants should know that our synagogues are centers for

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completed in the spring of 2007, as well as recent offerings of single-sex worship and programming at national and regional URJ Biennials, at NFTY convention and conclaves, and in the URJ camps

their whole self. Nothing needs to be checked at the temple door except your coat. That's how we build Houses for all people.

To sum up this discussion of the impact of gender in liberal Judaism, we return to one of the iconic debates in Jewish feminism. In her article "Notes Toward Finding the Right Question", author Cynthia Ozick famously argues the right question for Jewish (male and female) feminists is not theological, but sociological:

> "Concerning the nature of God, we are enjoined to be agnostic and not to speculate. 'You will see my back, but my face you will not see'. And when Moses asks God about the nature of divinity, the reply is only 'I am that I am'. In Deuteronomy we encounter a God who asserts that the mysteries of the universe belong to God, and thus it is our human business only to be decent to one another, steering clear of what we have not the capacity to fathom."

In direct response to Ozick's reflections, Judith Plaskow claims that the "right" question, at least in theory, remains theological because at the level of "fundamental presuppositions" of the halachic system, it is the notion of otherness of women, not simply vis-à-vis men but with respect to the male patriarchal image of God, that ultimately legitimates women's subordinate status[171]. Invoking Clifford Geertz's classical essay on "Religion as a Cultural System"[172], Plaskow points out that religious symbols express the way in which a society constructs and explains its world. The male God-idiom of the Hebrew Bible functions both as a model of God and as a model for the ethos of a community that strives for *imitatio Dei*. That is to say, it justifies the reservation of power and authority to men who, as patriarchal males, conform most closely to the image of God.

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[171] Plaskow, J. Standing Again At Sinai
[172] Geertz, C. 87-125

From the 1970s onward, this question ceased to be only a scholarly or philosophic one. In her 1982 article "(Re)Imaging God", Ellen Umansky describes the frustrations of many religious women with the man-made liturgy, as they comb the prayerbook in vain for a vocabulary that meaningfully expresses the Jewish woman's relationship with the God of Israel:

> "How much longer can I turn to the God of Our Fathers without screaming: 'I thought the covenant was made with our mothers too!' The image that dances before me of a male god who blesses His sons, those human beings (our fathers) who were truly created in His image...I'm not rejecting God as Father, Lord or King, but unless She is also Mother of Creation, Mistress of Heaven and Queen of the Universe, it is impossible for me to feel that I too have been created in the image of the Divine...Similarly, as long as God is only the God of our fathers and not our mothers, men will be perceived as having (and will perceive themselves as having) both a closer relationship with God and a higher religious status."[173]

Umansky calls for something beyond mere recourse to feminized God images and feminine pronouns writ large. If men and women alike are created in God's image, then God is neither exclusively male nor exclusively female but must encompass images of both. In this, she echoes Jacob Neusner, who argues that:

> "If feminist Judaisms emerge, excluding men, they will not serve and cannot stand, any more than have rigidly masculine Judaisms in times past and in our own day proved plausible. God made Adam "in our image, after our likeness" and that is, in the Torah's own words, "Male and female." Our sages of blessed memory set forth an androgynous Torah because they fully grasped the androgynous character, in attitude, emotion, feeling, and aspiration, of God made manifest in Torah. But how that is to play itself out...remains to be discovered."[174]

In terms not only of theology and God-language, but of the next stage of development for liberal Judaism itself, I think both Umansky and Neusner are correct. What liberal Judaism needs in order to remain relevant is to shift out of gender-neutral towards an

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[173] Umansky, E. 114-116
[174] Neusner, Jacob. Androgynous Judaism xi

understanding of Judaism that acknowledges the particularist gendered experiences of individuals, one in which we (and God) can be accepted and honored as male, female, and everything both in-between and beyond.

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