

Jonathan Frankel (Editor)

Jews and gender: The challenge of heirarchy

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Reviewed by Claire Katz

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Twelve original essays comprise the symposium in this volume dedicated to questions of gender and Judaism. I found them all to be interesting, insightful, scholarly, provocative, and pedagogically useful. The topics represented by the essays are diverse and cover wide range of issues from Rabbinic studies to history to anthropology and sociology. The essays are authored by both men and women, and

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Feminism and questions of gender have long been problematic for Judaism. Oftentimes the question of gender and the Rabbinic response to it cannot be cast aside as “mere” male bias. Rather, the questions often point to what is fundamentally at stake in Orthodox Judaism. For some, to change the roles of men and women, and in this case the roles particularly of women, is to undermine the very structure or foundation on which Judaism rests. Moreover, if the roles are halakhically mandated, by what means or methods would these changes take place? The most obvious of these changes was the admission of women into the Rabbinate of Reform and then Conservative Judaism. Opposition to this admission was not always on the grounds that women were not smart enough or wise enough. Rather, the reasons sometimes given were grounded solely in Jewish law: it is halakhically forbidden, and thus any change must be made through the appropriate avenues of halakhah (though we certainly should not ignore the possibility that the halakhic ruling is the result of some men thinking that women were not smart enough, wise enough, or rational enough to read Torah and understand Talmud).

Tamar Ross’s article “Modern Orthodoxy and the Challenge of Feminism” is a fascinating examination of the relationship between *halakhah* and the feminist challenges to Orthodox Judaism. Ross confesses that though she was at one point in time a woman who regarded various topics as fair battle for women—for example, women whose husbands were missing or who refused to grant their wives a divorce—she was not a woman who chose to play an active role in the battle itself. But she tells us, “as the years have gone by, I have come to feel less reticent about a more active association with what some would call the Jewish women’s movement” (4). For example, as we are reminded by Tamar Ross, “there is a significance to the fact that halakhah has been molded primarily by men, and . . . we should be willing to explore that

significance” (Ross, 5). Thus, we have part of the reason why Tamar Ross’s own view of the feminist challenge to Orthodoxy changed. Ross’s essay explores what she sees as the philosophical and sociological implications of the halakhah as it applies to men and women.

Ross first begins by articulating what caused the turn in her own attitude toward the “feminist” question in Orthodox Judaism. She cites the changed perception of women’s roles in Western society as having extended to the Orthodox community, her own exposure to feminist thinking, and recent research which has given her a new awareness of the variety of halakhic possibilities and precedents. Thus, Ross explains, she is now more aware of the gray area between what is permitted and what is prohibited by Jewish law.

Ross’s article rehearses key elements to the discussion before looking at the implications of the feminist challenge. She first highlights the problems that trouble feminists with regard to women’s status in Jewish law. Following that she recounts the various strategies that have been employed in adjusting halakhah to reality (for example, apologetics), the role of public policy in maintaining the status quo, the way in which the status of women is a special problem and why the threat of feminism is strong. One of the implications of the feminist challenge is precisely to call into question the legitimacy of halakhic reasoning, its sources, and its principles. Ross tells us, “The feminist critique makes the official explanation for many of the legalities that seem to discriminate against women—namely, that these are a simple and technical working out of objective halakhic principles—appear unconvincing” (20). Women opening the books for themselves seems to have facilitated a response that is, even if not consciously, more concerned with maintaining traditional authority than it is with preserving halakhic integrity (20). And Ross reminds us that the feminist challenge also involves serious sociological implications in women’s taking on of positions of religious authority. Devoting many years to study, for example, could alter the patterns of marriage and child-rearing. And the feminine presence in halakhic discussion will most likely alter the content of halakhic decision making, even if individual women are not responsible for any one decision (21). But in spite of the potential “dangers” to Orthodox Judaism, Ross insists that Judaism must confront the challenge of feminism face to face, rather than put its head in the sand and hope it will go away. She thinks that there is a way to do this without violating the deep traditions of Judaism.

Ross’s essay is both informative and provocative. She does an excellent job of laying out the different parts at work in this relationship between feminism and Judaism, and does an even better job at balancing what is at stake for each. Her sensitivity to this issue may lie with her own faithfulness to modern Orthodoxy. Her ambivalence with regard to these changes is revealed when she tells us of her admiration for her daughters’ accomplishments in their knowledge of Judaism (a knowledge that has traditionally been off limits to women) and their activities in women’s prayer groups and in her confession that in spite of these changes she is still reluctant to recite Kiddush. In a note in the endnote section she tells us of a warning that was given to her not to publish this essay for fear that it would be misinterpreted and misused. I, however, am grateful she ignored this warning. Ross’s clear writing, logical thinking, and concern for both “sides” of the debate allowed her to negotiate with care the delicate balance of presenting both sides of the issue, even though she does take a position in this discussion. This article and those that accompany it in this volume taught me a great deal and sensitized me to the issues at stake for both Judaism and feminism in the potentially hostile confrontation between the two.

In addition to the twelve articles that comprise the symposium, the volume includes two essays and a number of review essays and book reviews. On the whole, I found this volume to be a long awaited treasure of essays on such a timely concern for Judaism.

Claire Katz is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Jewish Studies at Penn State University. She has published articles on Levinas, Irigaray, Kierkegaard, and Merleau-Ponty. Her interests include the philosophy of education, Jewish philosophy, continental philosophy, and feminist theory. She is currently working on a book manuscript entitled *The Silent Footsteps of Rebecca: Rethinking the Feminine in and through the Work of Emmanuel Levinas*.