

Dear KJ Community,

I am honored to share with you in this online forum an excerpt from the senior honors thesis that I composed for the completion of my undergraduate degree in Jewish Studies from the University of Pennsylvania's College of Arts and Sciences. The paper, entitled The Glory Without: Orthodox Women and the Evolving Public Sphere, surveys the gradual expansion of women's roles in Orthodox public life throughout the 20th and in the beginning of the 21st centuries. I have provided you with the introductory and concluding chapters to the paper to give you a sense of its main points and overall structure and direction.

Chapter Four of my thesis, which is also provided here, focuses on the case study that resulted from my primary research at Congregation Kehillat Jeshurun during May 2001. That research was conducted through a survey of synagogue bulletins and yearbooks and through personal interviews. This chapter allowed me to take the general ideas and sociological phenomena posited in my thesis and bring them to life through the stories of many courageous and righteous women who gave of themselves to make your congregation a more holy place. I am awed by their devotion to their religion, their synagogue, and the cause of women's increased involvement in Orthodoxy, and I thank them for unknowingly providing me with the tools with which to study a movement that has spanned more than a century.

I am grateful to the Jewish Studies Program at the University of Pennsylvania for granting me the Goldfein Scholarship that allowed my research to take place. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Naomi Miller and Rae Gurewitsch, two women who have dedicated a tremendous amount of time to maintaining the archival materials at KJ, for allowing me to share in the fruits of their labors and for offering their valuable time and advice to this project. Alice Smokler, Robert Leifert, and the rest of the office staff at KJ were also tremendously helpful and to them I am grateful as well. Ideas in my paper were also influenced by eye-opening discussions that I had with Belda Lindenbaum and Rabbi Jack Bieler, who graciously took the time to guide me in my struggle with the burning questions of Orthodoxy and feminism. And of course, to Rabbi Haskel Lookstein and Leonard Silverman for their patience and support in the virtual publication of this paper, a hearty *todah rabbah*.

It is truly a privilege for me to contribute to the ongoing discussion of women's role in your congregation and in Orthodoxy at large. I welcome your questions and comments on the topic and would be glad to share with anyone interested the full text of the paper beyond what you will find here.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
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The Glory Without: Orthodox Women and the Evolving Public Sphere

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Introduction

“All the glory of the king’s daughter is within.” – Psalms 45:14

“A woman of valor, who can find her? Her price is far above rubies.” – Proverbs 31:10

The 31st chapter of the book of Proverbs contains an alphabetical acrostic that sings the praises of the ideal woman. The appropriate role of the *eishet chayil*, or woman of valor, is one that has troubled both secular and religious scholars for time immemorial. The image of that woman has certainly not been based only on the 22 verses that comprise the Biblical poem. Jewish tradition, from the Bible to modern works on practical *halakhah* (Jewish law), is replete with references to and discussion of women and their place in the Jewish community. The topic of this paper will be how 20th century American Orthodoxy interpreted that rich tradition and dictated for women a role that was continuously evolving and venturing further into the public sphere. A key question to keep in mind throughout the analysis is who exactly it is that defines Orthodoxy and has the power to dictate women’s roles.

Chapter 1, entitled “Private/Public Spheres and Their Applicability to Orthodoxy,” addresses the notion of a world divided into two spheres of activity, namely, private and public, and the gender affiliations associated with them, female and male,

respectively. Abstract concepts like spheres of activity are difficult to define and are in actuality more malleable than any concise definition can account for. With that in mind, Chapter 1 attempts to define private and public spheres in terms of two other social dichotomies, nature/culture and family/work, and raises the question of whether these gendered dichotomies are biologically or socially determined. Working with the assumption that it is the confluence of many different factors that shapes the private/public model, the chapter applies the complex model to traditional Judaism's treatment of women with respect to the private and public spheres. Finally, the rabbis' transformation of the *mechitzah*, or wall indicating the division between the men's and women's sections in an Orthodox prayer service, into an edifice that provides women with historically unprecedented access to the public aspects of Orthodoxy is incorporated into the chapter to symbolize the changing and expanding role of the Orthodox *ishet chayil*.

Chapter 2, "Synagogue Sisterhoods and the Mediation of Spheres," offers a historical contextualization of the American women's volunteer group movement and, more specifically, Orthodox synagogue sisterhoods. Much like the secular volunteer women of the early 20th century were expected to spend their time "mothering" society and saving it from vice, the Orthodox volunteer women of the synagogue sisterhood movement were responsible for "raising" the Orthodox community and saving it from the threat of assimilation. This was accomplished by transforming the Jewish home into a miniature sanctuary and, more importantly, reshaping the synagogue, the center of Jewish public worship, into a more home-like environment. Sisterhood women took upon themselves the duties of communal motherhood, such as food preparation, hospitality,

decorating, and education. By applying their domestic proclivity to the synagogue, sisterhood women served as a mediating force between the seemingly dichotomous private and public spheres. Although, under ordinary circumstances, Orthodox rabbis might have frowned upon women focusing their energies on participation in the public sphere, the fact that their activities were couched in terms of mothering and expanding that role to the community at large allowed their behavior to remain acceptable and rooted in traditional gender roles.

Chapter 3 addresses the next major stage of women's increased involvement in the public sphere: "Orthodox Feminism: A Foray Into the Public Sphere." The Oxford English Dictionary defines "feminism" as advocacy of the rights of women based on the theory of equality of the sexes. While classical Judaism never explicitly deems women inferior to men, there are many structures within the *halakhic* system that prevent women from ever achieving true equality with men. For instance, as the Orthodox interpretation of mainstream *halakhah* currently stands, women cannot lead public prayers or serve as rabbis. Thus, the term Orthodox feminism seems to be somewhat of an oxymoron. It can best be understood as a movement striving to maximize opportunities for women within Orthodoxy and its legal restrictions. Two examples of *halakhic* innovations meant to maximize women's public participation in Orthodoxy are women's *tefillah* groups and synagogue interns, both of which are dealt with at length in Chapter 3. Although introducing new opportunities like these serves to grant women greater access to the public aspects of their religion, Orthodox women remain excluded from the most public role of all: the rabbinate. This chapter takes up some of the sociological issues related to Orthodoxy's treatment of women's battle for rabbinic ordination and draws parallels

between Reform, Conservatism, and Orthodoxy. The discussion of Orthodox feminism ends with the acknowledgement that, for the majority of Orthodox congregations in America, women's foray into the public sphere is not about *tefillah* groups or institutional leadership positions. Rather, it is grass-roots changes like increased educational opportunities that are bringing women out of their homes and sisterhood meetings and into a higher level of engagement with their synagogues.

An example of a congregation in which Orthodox women have experienced the evolution of the public sphere is Manhattan's Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun (KJ), the subject of Chapter 4. The congregation has a rich history of women's involvement, and Chapter 4 traces the development of their congregational activity from the beginnings of the sisterhood organization to a long period of consciousness-raising about women and *halakhah* to the culmination of that discussion in the recent appointment of women to the position of synagogue officer. The history of KJ indeed reflects many of the broad historical and sociological phenomena touched upon in the first three chapters of this paper.

It is, however, important to realize two things about the use of such a case study. First, it is by definition just a case study, an example of just one American congregation's treatment of women and not necessarily an indication of how the issue of women in the synagogue was addressed in other communities. However, focusing on a specific community allows the abstract concepts of private and public spheres and gendered activity to be brought to life and understood in a practical framework. The second consideration with respect to Chapter 4 is its use of synagogue bulletins and yearbooks as foundations for tracing the chronology of events. From a historical perspective, such

documents tend to be overly celebratory and highlight major synagogue events and accomplishments without acknowledging the behind-the-scenes labor and strife that goes into synagogue work. Some voices of individuals from the KJ community have been inserted to address the deficiency inherent in analyzing synagogue-generated documents. However, it is also interesting to recognize that the KJ bulletins and yearbooks reflect how the congregation wishes to be remembered. The documentation of women's activity in the congregation, whether sisterhood-, education-, or administration-related, indicates that KJ considers itself part of the national discourse concentrating on the changing roles of Orthodox women and their relationship to the private and public spheres.

Chapter 4: Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun: A Case Study in Orthodox Women and the Evolving Public Sphere¹

“[The woman of valor] looks well to the ways of her household and the bread of idleness she does not eat.” – Proverbs 31:27

The question of the role of the observant woman in American Orthodoxy has been gaining momentum for more than a century. While many scholars, like Professor Tamar Ross, emphasize its salience in our day and age and “now more than ever... regard the status of women... as the greatest current challenge to Orthodoxy,”² the issue has a great deal of historical significance as well. The treatment of women in an American congregation was often a gauge for how distinctly “Americanized” that congregation was. For example, one defining feature of a “new shul” in America in the first decade and a half of the 20th century was its “inclusion of women,” an invitation that earlier immigrant congregations often did not extend.³ Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun⁴, known at that time as Khal Anshe Jeshurun,⁵ incorporated women into its congregation structure even before the onset of the 20th century. An historical record of KJ, compiled for the congregation’s 1946 yearbook, documents organized activities by a Ladies Auxiliary Society as early as 1886. These activities included the presentation of a Torah to the congregation and the coordination of a fund raising “strawberry festival” that, like other

¹ While many of the examples cited in this chapter are taken from the 1950s and beyond, the sisterhood activities described here are indicative of those taking place since the organization’s inception in 1930.

² Ross, Tamar. “Modern Orthodoxy and the Challenge of Feminism.” Jews and Gender: The Challenge to Hierarchy (Studies in Contemporary Jewry XVI). Ed. Jonathan Frankel. Oxford: Oxford U.P, 2000, 3.

³ Kaufman, David. Shul With a Pool: The “Synagogue-Center” in American Jewish History. Hanover, NH: U.P of New England, 1999, 191.

⁴ Referred to hereafter as KJ.

⁵ The name Kehillat Jeshurun, “a far more American and socially inclusive appellation than the traditional-sounding and -meaning ‘Anshe Jeshurun’,” (Joselit, Jenna W. New York’s Jewish Jews. Bloomington: Indiana U.P, 1990, 29) was chosen around 1881, according to Lookstein, Joseph. “Seventy-Five Yesteryears: A Historical Sketch of Kehilath Jeshurun.” KJ Yearbook, 1946, 22.

such festivals at that time, probably featured delectable strawberry treats, arts and crafts, and fun family activities.⁶ While KJ is somewhat of an exception in its early incorporation of women into its communal body, its focus on the importance of maintaining a congregational history made it a good case study for tracing the gradually increased role of women in the American Orthodox synagogue during the last 125 years. Seeking to integrate traditional Orthodoxy into the upscale way of life on Manhattan's Upper East Side, KJ consistently offered its female congregants a level of access to public religious life that paralleled women's roles in other facets of American life.

KJ had no reservations about identifying itself as a distinctly American synagogue. The historical record of the congregation mentioned above opens with the recognition that “an institution is not born in a vacuum; nor is it created *ex nihilo*. It is the product of the time, a result of the dynamic forces of life...” The historical account proceeds to paint the picture of “the world in which Kehilath Jeshurun was born,” namely, a New York City that was slowly growing into its own unique culture of fashion, mass transportation, and recreation. KJ's history further notes that the congregation was founded with the intent to “bridge the gulf” between the “up-town richer and Americanized Jews and the poorer [more devout] Jews on the lower east side.” The congregation's founders were highly cognizant of the American Jewish population in which they found themselves, one in which “assimilation was on the march” and on which intermarriage had taken its toll by driving many Jews to “sever their ties with the synagogue and...maintain only a social contact with their people.”⁷ From its very inception, KJ acknowledged its role as a congregation designed to help those upscale

⁶ Lookstein 22.

⁷ Lookstein 17-20.

Manhattan Jews who were looking to maintain a strong American identity find a place for themselves within Orthodoxy as well.

In line with this philosophy of integrating the religious and the secular was KJ's commitment to treating women much like they were treated in the contemporary society. That parallel was expressed overtly in the history of the KJ sisterhood also commissioned for the 1946 yearbook:

It was in the late Victorian period that the women of Kehilath Jeshurun became active in the affairs of the congregation and in the affairs of the community at large. During that era, a woman would be considered indiscreet if she were interested in books...She was expected to be shy, charming, dependent, and even slightly capricious. It was during that period that the Sisterhood came into being.

According to that same historical account, the KJ sisterhood records from the 19th century contain an 1886 article from *The Jewish Messenger* telling of the “interesting ceremony” that accompanied the *Sefer Torah* dedication and a “record...in the press” of a June 10, 1887 “Strawberry Festival” that was “largely attended and netted quite a large amount.”⁸

The coordination of such family-oriented events was considered activity of the home extended and was thus suitable feminine behavior for upscale American Jewish women

The onset of the 20th century brought a slight shift in focus for the women of the KJ Ladies' Auxiliary, as they began to take on the “religious education of the young as their special concern.” An October 1908 meeting was called, probably by the sisterhood president, for the women of KJ to spark their interest in the “care and discipline of” the congregation's religious school.⁹ The women tended to the needs of KJ's youth

⁸ Etra, Mrs. Harry. “Jewish Womanhood in Action: A History of the Kehilath Jeshurun Sisterhood.” *KJ Yearbook*, 1946, 39.

⁹ Note the use of the mothering terms “care” and “discipline” with respect to women's role in educating the congregation. For more details on education as a motherly responsibility, see Hyman, Paula. *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*. Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1995, 19 and 25-27. For more

education arm until the school broke away from the congregation and formed the autonomous Central Jewish Institute (CJI) in 1916. Remaining loyal to the cause of Jewish education, the Ladies' Auxiliary that was formerly affiliated with KJ instead came to view itself as the official women's organization of the CJI, leaving KJ without a woman's branch for almost 15 years.¹⁰

In light of the many women's volunteer groups and benevolent societies popping up all over America, the absence of a women's organization affiliated with KJ left associate Rabbi Joseph Lookstein feeling uneasy. He worked to bring the women of the congregation together to form a sisterhood and he succeeded in March of 1930, when the women of the regular KJ bible class were finally compelled by Rabbi Lookstein's romanticized argument that "a congregation without a sisterhood is like a home without a mother." Lookstein defined the sisterhood as that force which "brings in a spirit of hospitality, friendship, sociability and warmth into a congregation." The dedicated volunteer women of the KJ sisterhood took Rabbi Lookstein's charge very seriously and "sought to demonstrate by work and deeds the traditional role of service and devotion of the Jewish woman."¹¹

Mrs. Harry Etra,¹² author of the sisterhood historical account for the 1946 KJ Yearbook, asks, "[W]hat role did the Sisterhood play in the life and fortunes of Kehilath Jeshurun?" Herself an active member of the KJ sisterhood, Etra recognizes the inability

on sisterhoods accepting the responsibility of communal education as part of their involvement in public forms of motherhood, see Nadell, Pamela and Simon, Rita. "Ladies of the Sisterhood: Women in the American Reform Synagogue, 1900-1930." Active Voices. Ed. Maurie Sacks. Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1995, 67.

¹⁰ Etra 39.

¹¹ Etra 40.

¹² It is interesting to note that throughout the KJ yearbooks and bulletins, women are referred to as the "Mrs." of their husbands, never by their own first names. This phenomenon occurred as late as the June 30, 1988 KJ Bulletin.

to answer this question fully, saying that “one might as well ask what role did and does a mother play in the life of her family. There are functions too many to mention...” Just like mothers, sisterhood women were expected to perform many unseen, unpaid, and unrecognized deeds. Nevertheless, Etra “attempt[s] to enumerate...some of the activities and to list only several of the contributions of the [sisterhood] organization.” Part of the sisterhood’s “service to the synagogue” was, “like the woman of valor in Proverbs... [who] looketh well to the ways of her household,¹³ ...[making] the synagogue...more beautiful a place for the living and more holy a shrine for the departed.” This was accomplished through the sisterhood’s diligence in ensuring the presence of cushions on the pews of the sanctuary, velvet curtains over the *Aron Kodesh* (Holy Ark), adornments for the Torah scrolls, the “beautiful Memorial Tablets... inscribed [with] the names of departed dear ones,” and drapes on the windows of the synagogue social hall.¹⁴

There are many other examples of this behind-the-scenes type of service throughout the KJ sisterhood history. In 1950, the sisterhood presented a spinet piano to the congregation for use in the social hall. The KJ Bulletin reported the piano to be “beautiful to the eye and most pleasing to the ear” and thanked the sisterhood “for making our lovely Social Hall still lovelier.”¹⁵ It was also noted that in 1954, the sisterhood had done an exceptional job of decorating the congregational *sukkah*,¹⁶ an extension of the “home” motif of the synagogue.¹⁷ Rae Gurewitsch, a former president of the KJ sisterhood and the current Second Vice President of the congregation, recalls that

¹³ Quoting Proverbs 31:27.

¹⁴ Etra 40-41.

¹⁵ KJ Bulletin, June 2, 1950.

¹⁶ KJ Bulletin, October 29, 1954.

¹⁷ In Jewish law, the *sukkah* is treated as a temporary dwelling, one that observers of *Sukkot* are to view as their home for the duration of the holiday.

in the early 1970s, the sisterhood donated hand-made needlepoint Torah covers to the shul.¹⁸ The women of the sisterhood also presented KJ with a needlepoint *chupah* (wedding canopy) in 1978, a project to which thirty female congregants offered their creative talents.¹⁹

In addition to tending to the synagogue “home,” the sisterhood women, “consistent with the tradition of motherhood...made the children of the congregation its special concern.” Like mothers packing snacks for their children to hold them over until the conclusion of synagogue services, the sisterhood women “provide[d] goodies and holiday souvenirs for the children” during special times like Chanukah, Purim, and Simchat Torah. They also presented each KJ Bar Mitzvah boy with a prayer book “as a memento of an important day in the life of a maturing Jewish boy.”²⁰ Also in line with their role as the mothers of the synagogue, they facilitated the transmission of Jewish values through youth education. They were strong supporters, financially and otherwise, of the Ramaz School, founded in 1936 to provide boys and girls with a top-notch Jewish and secular education, and of summer camps that enriched the religious experience of the congregation’s young people.²¹ For instance, the KJ Bulletin recorded that, at the annual closing meeting of the KJ sisterhood in 1950, the sisterhood president told of the great financial success of events throughout the year, such as the Donor Luncheon, that allowed the sisterhood to send “substantial gifts” to the Educational Scholarship Funds of Ramaz, the congregational Religious School, and the Camp Fund.²²

¹⁸ Gurewitsch, Rae. Personal interview. 16 May 2001.

¹⁹ KJ Bulletin, March 10, 1978.

²⁰ The KJ sisterhood later changed its policy and extended its gift-giving to Bat Mitzvah girls as well.

²¹ Etra 41.

²² KJ Bulletin, June 2, 1950.

Etra also wrote of the cultural, social, and philanthropic activities of the KJ sisterhood. Events contributing to the “cultural enrichment” of the sisterhood women included speakers and presenters at the organization’s meetings.²³ For instance, in 1954-1955, sisterhood meetings featured presentations by Mrs. Richard Stewart of the New York Horticultural Society on the incorporation of houseplants into home décor, Dvora Lapson of the Jewish Education Committee of New York on “The Jew and the Dance,” and Blix Ruskay, the “one woman show,” on Yiddish and Hebrew folklore.²⁴ In addition, “formal classes of instruction for women” in topics like “Hebrew, Bible, Jewish History, and Jewish Religious Practice” were maintained throughout the years, and it was from the precursor to one such sisterhood-officiated class that the organization itself was born.²⁵ These culturally enriching activities indicate the beginnings of a value placed on women’s cultural well-roundedness and not simply on their adeptness at domestic tasks.

The social activities, a wide range of programs including theater parties, teas, and holiday celebrations prepared with a distinctly female flair, all “contributed greatly to the cementing of friendship and to the cultivation of a real family atmosphere in the congregation.”²⁶ One such example was the January 30, 1950 Luncheon and Card Party, described as “one of those gatherings where the members of the Sisterhood and their friends will have a chance to get together in a purely social atmosphere to have a bite and enjoy themselves at cards, mah jongg, and what have you,”²⁷ much like an intimate social gathering that a woman would prepare in her own home. In the way of philanthropy, the sisterhood “contributed regularly and generously to a variety of causes,” including the

²³ Etra 42.

²⁴ KJ Bulletin, November 19, December 10, and December 31, 1954.

²⁵ Etra 42.

²⁶ Etra 42.

²⁷ KJ Bulletin, January 13, 1950.

Federation for the Support of Jewish Philanthropic Societies, the Red Cross, the Jewish Welfare Board, Yeshiva University, United Jewish Appeal, and ORT, and “encouraged its members as individuals to contribute to organized philanthropy.”²⁸ The sisterhood also generated a strong volunteer ethic and, to that end, planned trips like the 1954 visit to the Home for the Aged and Infirm Hebrews.²⁹

These types of involvements were standard sisterhood activity from the organization’s inception until, to some extent, even the present day.³⁰ While the beginnings of women’s involvements in the communal aspects of KJ were in the sisterhood, the role and status of women in the congregation slowly grew to parallel those of their male counterparts. The first step in this direction was taken in 1949, when the KJ Board of Trustees decided to grant “special membership” status, which was previously limited to the widows of deceased male congregants, to the “unmarried ladies” of the synagogue.³¹ This symbolized KJ’s recognition that the single women of the community, who presumably might have been uncomfortable serving the mothering role of the sisterhood woman, were also of value to the synagogue and required inclusion in the congregational structure. While these women were not granted the full-fledged membership available to men, they were officially recognized in some capacity as members of the congregation. A second unique invitation was extended to the women of KJ six months later, when the Men’s Club, “acceding to the many requests that have been received...decided to open the doors of its next Forum Meeting...to men and women

²⁸ Etra 42.

²⁹ KJ Bulletin, November 26, 1954.

³⁰ The September 2001 KJ Bulletin reported the upcoming sisterhood Annual Book Review meeting and the November 2001 KJ Bulletin invited congregants to the sisterhood Chanukah Boutique.

³¹ KJ Bulletin, November 11, 1949.

alike. Although originally planned as a ‘men only’ meeting, it was felt that our guest speaker should be heard all by of our members and friends.”³²

These small steps toward the improvement of women’s status in the congregation were supplemented by an increase in Jewish education for women. A 1963 edition of the KJ Bulletin, which provides a list of those who regularly participated in the various Torah classes offered by the congregation, reveals that a sizable number of women were in attendance of these classes, including Rabbi Haskel Lookstein’s coed Talmud class.³³

Naomi Miller, a prominent member of the KJ community and the former head of the History Department at Hunter College, placed a strong emphasis on the role of education in the creation of the “new Orthodox woman.” “There is a direct relationship between Jewish education for women and the role that they’ll play in Jewish synagogue life,” said Miller. “It’s hard to keep women down and out once they know Talmud.”³⁴ Finally placed on a more level playing field with their male counterparts with respect to education, the women of KJ slowly but surely expanded their roles in the synagogue, often venturing into spheres of activity previously accessible to men only.

One such innovation was the introduction of a Bat Mitzvah program at KJ. As proclaimed by the KJ Bulletin in 1972:

Our purpose is not to duplicate the boys which in most cases has obscured the religious nature of such an occasion. We merely feel that in this day and age where much more is expected of women in religious performance, commitment and even leadership, it is important to [publicly] highlight the transition from immaturity to responsibility which tradition ascribed to the twelfth birthday of a Jewish girl. We propose to do this periodically for individual young ladies in the congregation as they reach their religious majority.

³² KJ Bulletin, May 12, 1950.

³³ KJ Bulletin, February 1, 1963.

³⁴ Miller, Naomi. Personal interview. 16 May 2001.

The first documented KJ Bat Mitzvah celebration took place on Saturday afternoon, December 16, 1972 at a festive *Seudah Shlishit* (Shabbat third meal) at which the three 12-year-old guests of honor were addressed by the rabbi and had traditional *z'mirot* (Shabbat songs) sung in their honor.³⁵ One month later, a similar *Seudah Shlishit* was held in honor of another Bat Mitzvah and she was allowed to deliver a “brief D’var Torah for the occasion,”³⁶ a bold foray into the public sphere for any woman, regardless of age.

The 1970s, a decade of milestones for American feminists, brought to KJ a great deal of male-dominated discussion on the topic of women in Judaism. At a March 1973 “Sunday evening study group,” Rabbi Mayer Herskovics addressed “The Role of Women in Jewish Law” and, more specifically, the concept of *nashim da’atan kalot*,³⁷ the Talmudic proposition that women are “light-minded.”³⁸ Another such example was the 1973 “Annual Halakhic discourse on Shabbat Hagadol (the Shabbat before Passover),” given by Rabbi Haskel Lookstein. The lecture was entitled “Women According to Jewish Law – Their Status, Their Rights and Their Obligations” and was Rabbi Lookstein’s effort to “explain some of the anomalies of the position of women in Judaism as well as to present some of the reactions of Judaism to the new struggle for women’s rights in our day.”³⁹ Exactly three years later, Rabbi Lookstein presented another Shabbat HaGadol discourse on women and *halakhah*, emphasizing on that occasion that “in recent years the changing status of women in the secular world has inspired many questions about women’s role in Judaism” and sorting out issues like “Talit and T’filin

³⁵ KJ Bulletin, December 15, 1972.

³⁶ KJ Bulletin, January 19, 1973.

³⁷ KJ Bulletin March 23, 1973.

³⁸ Translation taken from Hauptman, Judith. *Rereading the Rabbis*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998, 38. For more information on *nashim da’atan kalot*, see Hauptman 38-39, 57 n. 26, and Wegner, Judith Romney. “The Image and Status of Women in Classical Rabbinic Judaism.” *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*. Ed. Judith Baskin, Detroit: Wayne State U. P: 1999, 85.

³⁹ KJ Bulletin, April 6, 1973.

for women, a special women's minyan, aliyot, kiddush, havdalah, and a woman's role in the congregation."⁴⁰ These discussions are explicit recognitions on the part of KJ that the ostensibly conflicting views of mainstream feminism and Orthodox Judaism needed to be addressed by *halakhic* community.

In light of such controversial and progressive conversations, it is no coincidence that in 1976, the women of KJ achieved their largest advance to date. On May 6, nearly 90% of the 300 KJ members who attended the 104th Annual Meeting of the Congregation voted in favor of an amendment to the synagogue constitution that allowed women to be members in full standing and to serve as trustees. Rabbi Joseph Lookstein clarified for those in attendance that both he and his son, Rabbi Haskel, approved the amendment based on a conference held with Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, one of the major *halakhic* authorities for American Orthodoxy. The elder Rabbi Lookstein further stated that the amendment was "not only in keeping with the tradition of this congregation as an Orthodox congregation but also as a pace-setter which does what can be done to make Orthodox Judaism more responsive to the needs of contemporary Jews." The amendment took effect immediately and, to that end, female congregant Ami Texon was appointed to the position of Associate Trustee, a position never before held by someone of her gender. It is important to note that Texon, a former KJ sisterhood president, was deemed suitable for the position of trustee because of the valuable skills she developed in her capacity as a sisterhood volunteer.⁴¹

The next major milestone in the quest for increased public involvement for the women of KJ was the formation of a women's *tefillah* group. In 1978 and 1980, KJ

⁴⁰ KJ Bulletin, April 2, 1976.

⁴¹ KJ Bulletin, May 14, 1976.

published formal invitations to the women of the community that called for their attendance at daily morning services, especially the late 8:55 am minyan at the Ramaz Upper School that might better suit their schedules.⁴² In 1988, the Board of Trustees came to the conclusion that, despite these special invitations, the traditional minyan was not sufficiently meeting the women's needs and therefore "approved in principle the plans for" a women's *tefillah* group. Once again using the Shabbat HaGadol discourse as a forum for public discussion and increasing awareness, Rabbi Haskel Lookstein took 80 minutes to address the "halakhic issues involved in the creation and functioning of such a group," such as what prayers can be recited, reading the Torah, and the observance of Bat Mitzvah or a *Shabbat Kallah* (Shabbat preceding a bride's marriage) in such a forum.⁴³ At the 116th Annual Meeting of the Congregation, held on April 26, 1988, the establishment of the KJ women's *tefillah* group was "approved unanimously and enthusiastically" by those in attendance. Saturday morning, April 30, 1988 marked the first time that, under KJ's roof, women led services and read from the Torah in a public forum, and, as prominent feminist writer Judith Hauptman summarized, were given "equal access to *kedushah* (holiness)." The group continued to grow in subsequent years, meeting several times each year, and some of the pioneering women who worked on the KJ women's *tefillah* group went on to become leaders in the international Women's Tefilah Group Network.⁴⁴

Reactions to the introduction of organized women's *tefillah* into the KJ community were very positive. Rabbi Lookstein marveled at the fact that 125 women attended the first meeting of the service and "experienced a level of *kavana* (intention)

⁴² KJ Bulletin, October 15, 1978 and January 18, 1980.

⁴³ KJ Bulletin, March 18, 1988.

⁴⁴ KJ Bulletin, December 6, 1991.

and tefillah which are objectively extremely impressive and subjectively very important to those who were experiencing it.”⁴⁵ Several years after the group’s inception, he was also quoted as saying that women’s *tefillah* was one of the best things that had happened to the congregation in years.⁴⁶ Belda Lindenbaum, a member of the executive boards of JOFA (the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance) and Drisha, an institute of advanced-level Torah study for women in Manhattan, and a founding member of the KJ women’s *tefillah* group, confirmed Rabbi Lookstein’s assessment of the increased *kavana* in the all-female prayer setting. There is “never a Shabbat that I go [to women’s *tefillah*] and don’t feel uplifted,” Lindenbaum said. “There is something about leading women in prayer. It has certainly made a difference in my prayer. For once, women do not play a passive role like they tend to.” She also described the environment at the KJ women’s *tefillah* group as “welcoming,” adding that Rabbi Lookstein’s role in offering the group a meeting space in the synagogue building “set the tone” for the group and granted it a sense of validity.⁴⁷

The most recent chapter in the story of the women of KJ was the 1999 election of two women to congregational office. Granted *halakhic* validation by Yeshiva University’s Rabbi Hershel Schachter and other male legal authorities, those attending the 127th Annual Meeting of the Congregation unanimously elected two former sisterhood presidents, Rae Gurewitsch and Dr. Diana Heller, to the positions of Third Vice President and Financial Secretary, respectively. Both women were recognized for their “exceptionally devoted service to the congregation over the years,” and the “historical change in the make up of the leadership of the congregation was greeted with much enthusiasm.”

⁴⁵ KJ Bulletin, June 30, 1988.

⁴⁶ Lindenbaum, Belda. Personal interview. 18 Dec 2001.

⁴⁷ Lindenbaum, interview.

However, the prospect of a woman ever becoming president of KJ remains dubious. Rabbi Schachter, who was invited to KJ in April 1999 to give a *shiur* (Torah lecture) on Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's *halakhic* ruling on women and public leadership, found no problem with women serving as synagogue officers "with the *possible* exception of President." Jewish law prevents women from being monarchs, and rabbis fear that women who are "authorized to spend significant sums of money for the congregation without clearance from an executive committee or a board or anything other authority" too closely resemble those authoritative positions that they are forbidden to hold.⁴⁸ As evidenced by the existence of other female Orthodox synagogue presidents in America, like Dr. Phillipa Newfield of San Francisco's Congregation Chevra Thilim,⁴⁹ this issue is not at all clear-cut. Slowly but surely, Orthodox congregations are warming up to the idea of appointing female presidents, and congregations that are acting upon that sentiment are confidently acting on solid *halakhic* grounds, not in defiance of Jewish law. The issue of female synagogue presidents and other leadership positions continues to be negotiated in the Orthodox community. Like so many other questions related to women's role in the synagogue that have faced KJ over the years, solutions to the liking of both the congregants and the *halakhic* authorities will continue to be negotiated.

While KJ is more progressive in its inclusion of women than many other Orthodox synagogues, it provides a rich history of a phenomenon that, to some extent, occurred in most American synagogues: the gradual expansion of women's access to public aspects of synagogue life. Like the founding of the congregation, this did not

⁴⁸ KJ Bulletin, June 18, 1999. For a further discussion of halakhah's view on women in leadership roles, see Bleich, J. David. "Women on Synagogue Boards." *Tradition* 15 (1): 1976, 53-67.

⁴⁹ Goldsmith, Aleza. "S.F. Orthodox shul gets its first female president." *Jewish Bulletin News of Northern California* 29 Jun 2001. 19 Dec 2001 <<http://www.jewishsf.com/bk010629/sfp3.shtml>>.

occur “in a vacuum.”⁵⁰ The changing roles of the women of KJ were strongly influenced by a society growing more conscious of feminism and the needs of women, especially those with strong educations, to find public venues for their talents and to be treated like their male counterparts. The place of women at KJ continues to be a topic of discussion to this day. For instance, Rabbi Haskel Lookstein delivered a 2001 *Shabbat Shuva* (Shabbat between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur) discourse called “Women Reading the Torah in Shul: Right or Wrong? Desirable or Not?” in response to an article in the Summer 2001 Edah⁵¹ Journal positing that today there is no halakhic problem with “Torah reading by women in a regular synagogue service.”⁵² Questions of this nature face the Orthodox world at large, and it is pioneering synagogues like KJ that are paving the way for Orthodox women seeking a higher level of public involvement in Judaism.

⁵⁰ Lookstein 17.

⁵¹ A Modern Orthodox think-tank.

⁵² KJ Bulletin, September 7, 2001. The issue of the Edah Journal under discussion can be found at <<http://www.edah.org/backend/coldfusion/displayissue.cfm?volume=1&issue=2>>.

Conclusion

“There is nothing new under the sun.” – Ecclesiastes 1:9

The impact of 20th century American gender mores on traditional Judaism is highly pronounced. Starting with the women’s volunteer group movement and continuing through the modern feminist movement, Orthodoxy has borrowed from secular society many ideas related to standards of appropriate gendered behavior. In the early 20th century, Orthodox women followed the example of their gentile counterparts and joined volunteer organizations like sisterhoods. Women became responsible for “social housekeeping,” which, for sisterhood women, meant serving as mothers of their congregations by handling food preparation, decorating, child care, and other unseen, unpaid tasks. Gradually, Orthodox women branched out from their sisterhood work and incorporated the *zeitgeist*, namely, feminist consciousness, into their religious service. The age of Orthodox feminism brought with it the development of women’s *tefillah* groups, congregational interns, more female-friendly *mechitzot*, and other such innovations aimed at maximizing female involvement in the public aspects of Orthodoxy.

As mentioned in the introduction, the term Orthodox feminism seems oxymoronic. Feminism is generally understood as a policy of absolute gender equality, something that Jewish law, in its exclusion of women from certain commandments and positions, does not allow. Since the 1970s, the Orthodox feminist movement has certainly made great strides in opening doors for women seeking a heightened level of public participation in their religion. However, these women on a mission for increased religious participation cannot act alone. Orthodox women remain limited to activity

advocated by the all-male community of rabbis that establishes and interprets Jewish law. All innovations to expand women's public role in Orthodoxy, such as women's *tefillah* groups or leadership positions, must have the backing of a respected male rabbi in order to gain validity in the mainstream religious community. At KJ and other congregations, Orthodox rabbis provided much support for women's early sisterhood efforts, and it is partially for that reason that sisterhood women were not viewed as overstepping their boundaries by participating in public synagogue life. Similar rabbinic backing was required to validate the innovations of the Orthodox feminist movement. Nearly all women's *tefillah* groups have male rabbinic advisors to ensure their adherence to *halakhah*. Giving women positions like congregational intern or synagogue officer also requires the approval of a qualified rabbinic authority. Each step of the journey toward expanding the role of women in Orthodoxy calls for the consultation of a rabbi, as evidenced by KJ holding community *shiurim* on various women's issues anytime an innovation was to occur. In Orthodox feminism, the classic feminist poster depicting Rosie the Riveter saying "We Can Do It" takes on an entirely new meaning: "We Can Do It, but only if our male rabbis tell us so."

Although the Orthodox feminist movement has followed a timeline roughly parallel to its secular counterpart, the dynamic of change is entirely different in a *halakhic* community. Modern Orthodoxy, the sector of the Orthodox world from which most of the energy for feminist change generates, advocates incorporating aspects of the secular modern world into Judaism as long as the changes are within the confines of *halakhah* and are beneficial to the *halakhic* community. Only the recognized authorities on *halakhah*, the rabbis, can make decisions of that sort. As long as women are barred

from the Orthodox rabbinate, women seeking changes in the development of *halakhah* are reliant on the male rabbinate for support. The creation of positions like female congregational interns and *yoatzot halakhah* (female Jewish legal advisors) are slowly bringing women into the learning community. However, it is not until women are respected by all members of the elite circle of male scholars, not just those of the left-wing sector, that women's input into *halakhic* decisions, like those on women's ability to serve as synagogue presidents or in the rabbinate, will be considered. That is not likely to occur until, by circular logic, women are serving in the rabbinate and are endowed with legal authority equal to that of their male counterparts.

In the meantime, while Orthodox women are officially proscribed from entering the rabbinate, the question remains: is the public sphere of Orthodoxy and women's access to it still evolving and expanding? The answer to that question lies in how one defines Orthodoxy. The left-wing community, including rabbis like Avi Weiss and Haskel Lookstein, continues to bring an innovative spirit to its approach to women and *halakhah*. In their congregations and others like the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale and KJ, women's roles continue to expand and be negotiated. However, the rest of the Orthodox world is not as excited about fusing the concepts of feminism and tradition. For example, a recent study shows that a majority of surveyed Stern College for Women students "express[ed] sentiments that reveal a rejection of, or ambivalence toward women's prayer groups," perhaps indicating the hesitance of many *halakhically* observant younger women to identify with the cause of Orthodox feminism.⁵³ This is not to say, however, that no change is occurring in the more right-wing sectors of Orthodoxy.

⁵³ Langer, Sidney. "Women's Prayer Groups: A Case Study In Feminism And Modern Orthodoxy." *Ten Da'at* XI, Spring 1998. 19 Dec 2001 <<http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/english/ten-daat/langer-1.htm>>. Also, JOFA home page. 19 Dec 2001 <<http://www.jofa.org/conferencespklist.htm>>

Daphna Shapiro Goldberg and Sari Jacobs, two well-known Orthodox feminists, led a session at the June 2001 JOFA conference on affecting feminist change in communities that are apprehensive about feminism. Their suggestions advocated working toward small, grass-roots changes and helping to offer modern Orthodox programming to women who are often untargeted, such as those in smaller Jewish communities and those without especially strong Jewish educational backgrounds. Goldberg also placed a special emphasis on the importance of working with the locally respected rabbi in instituting community changes.⁵⁴ As long as women are excluded from the rabbinate, coordination between female feminists seeking change and *halakhic* authorities seeking to guarantee the adherence of *halakhah* will be of the utmost importance. As the tensions between feminism and *halakhah* heighten in intensity, Blu Greenberg's 15-year old question of will there be Orthodox women rabbis⁵⁵ takes on a new level of significance. The stakes are high and it is likely that intellectually open and honest congregations like KJ are likely to play an integral role in the solution to the conflict.

⁵⁴ Goldberg, Dapha Shapiro and Jacobs, Sari. "Working for Change in our Communities." JOFA in Progress 2001 Conference. Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance. 6 May 2001.

⁵⁵ Greenberg, Blu. "Will There Be Orthodox Women Rabbis?" *Judaism* 33 (1): 1984, 23-33.