The New York Jewish Week
SERVING THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF GREATER NEW YORK

The Full Story

January 14, 2000 / 7 Shvat 5760

New York

Feminism making inroads but dividing generations, says landmark study.

By: Jonathan Mark, Associate Editor

Orthodox feminism, barely a quarter-century old and facing withering criticism, has nevertheless transformed and energized Modern Orthodoxy, according to a study believed to be the first examination of the impact of the nascent movement.

The American Jewish Committee report by Brandeis University sociologist Sylvia Barack Fishman, a copy of which was obtained by The Jewish Week, reveals that women's study groups, prayer groups and concern for agunot (women unable to obtain a ritual divorce) have wrought significant changes within Modern Orthodoxy, long thought to be in a theological malaise.

"The inroads that feminism has made within Modern Orthodoxy are far greater than anyone would have thought," said Steven Bayme, director of the AJCommittee's Jewish Communal Affairs Department.

"Orthodox leadership 10 years ago derided the idea of Orthodox feminism," he said. "Now the inroads are acknowledged, cultural attitudes are changing. The empirical data is real: Women's study groups, and to a lesser degree prayer groups, are thriving."

The changes, according to Bayme, have provided a counter-trend to the rise of right-wing Orthodoxy, whose rabbinic leaders have severely criticized Orthodox feminism.

"What was once considered the vision of the Jewish future — living in two worlds, being able to draw the comparisons and contrasts, a beautiful vision of true synthesis between tradition and modern culture — surprisingly, and sadly, has receded," said Bayme. "What we've witnessed is the ascendancy of isolationist values.

"But while all this was happening, among an elite group of Jewish women the voice of Modern Orthodoxy has really been heard. That's a shift in authority that no one would have previously imagined."

The study will be presented at the third international conference of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist

Alliance Feb. 20-21 in New York.

The report — incorporating materials from previous conferences and a series of interviews and focus group discussions with 52 Modern Orthodox women, activists and scholars (including 12 men) — found that 100 percent cited the high level of Jewish education for women to be the major area of transformation.

About half of the participants also cited the increased interest in the spiritual lives of Jewish women; the presence of women in religious and communal leadership; and attention to resolving problems such as that of agunot.

The study asserts that despite strained relations between denominations, "Orthodox women have often found common cause with their non-Orthodox sisters, and have developed meaningful dialogues and bridges between the various wings of Judaism."

But while it depicts Orthodox feminists as thoroughly devoted to a mastery of rabbinic literature and intellect, the study reveals a sharp generational divide over the future of activism and considerable resistance to some of the movement's signature innovations.

The fissure is between what the study calls the "mothers" (the first wave of feminists, mostly in the 50s and older) and "daughters" (women in the 30s, 20s or teens). While the younger generation has eagerly taken to the new intellectual options won by the older feminists in an Orthodox world where teaching Talmud to women was once taboo, the daughters are rejecting women's prayer groups and activism on behalf of agunot.

As one younger woman put it: "We take a more respectful approach to halacha."

Blu Greenberg of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, considered one of the leading inspirations and founding mothers of Orthodox feminism, chaired the AJCommittee Petchek Family Center group that supported the study.

She told The Jewish Week that the generational split "in some ways parallels the situation in secular feminism where younger women are very quick to turn their back on the 'mothers' who articulated feminism and openly defined themselves. The younger women now have benefits and access they take for granted."

"Many of these issues have not been worked through; nobody has all the answers. We're really still at the beginning of this revolution."

The ambivalence on the agunah issue was underlined by the fact that only 17 percent said that solving the problem was on their list of personal goals. When asked to list five major problems caused or affected by the women's movement, agunot again scored poorly: only about 20 percent mentioned agunot, the same percentage citing the problem of "women imitating men" or indulging in "pseudo-masculine" behaviors.

The disregard for agunot signaled to Greenberg "a certain amount of self-interest and not enough of an interest in the community."

Bayme said the attention already given to agunot indicates a changing culture. "But that has not been translated into a change in action, a change in policy, a change in behavior," he said. "However, the

change in culture cannot be ignored."

Despite the unanimity on the positive aspects of women engaged in Jewish study, the stylistic approach — which has mostly followed the rigorous Lithuanian model of classical non-chasidic yeshivas — is now drawing fire. About one-fifth of the respondents expressed concern about women becoming "trapped within the intellectual confines of [a masculine] approach rather than bringing to [their studies] a uniquely feminine vantage point."

Only 38 percent cited women's tefillah groups as a major change. The low number supports a recent study by sociologist Sidney Langer published in the religious educational journal Ten Da'at which found that students at Yeshiva University's Stern College for Women responded to feminist tefillah groups with "a sense of ambivalence, confusion and rejection."

A sample of 175 students in the Langer study responded in a questionnaire that although they have a high commitment to prayer — 86 percent pray daily — only 23 percent choose to pray within feminist prayer groups; just 17 percent said that they would attend again; and only 12 percent felt "more spiritually elevated" there than they did in a traditional service.

The first women's prayer group was founded in 1973, and there are now 40 groups in the United States, according to the study.

"Not a single one of the women, rabbis and scholars interviewed for this study believe the tefillah groups to be the most important result of feminism. ... Many women and men expressed the belief that the groups themselves were a transient or transitional phenomenon," Fishman wrote.

"Numerically, the informants were certainly correct that the women's prayer groups have directly affected a relatively small number of Orthodox women. Ironically, their visibility has been astonishingly enhanced by those who oppose and demonize them."

Unlike their non-Orthodox sisters, the Orthodox feminists had no interest in becoming rabbis and only "5 to 10 percent" advocated changing the language of the prayerbook to be more gender-sensitive.

Although 33 percent of the survey group wanted to be recognized "as scholars of rabbinic literature with titles that reflect their expertise," Fishman noted that "in each of these Orthodox career paths, the word rabbi is scrupulously avoided."

"Like the headmistresses of many Orthodox schools for women in Israel, young crypto-rabbinic interns seem to feel that they will be far more securely ensconced within mainstream Orthodox life if they eschew what some wryly refer to as the 'F word — feminism,' the stigma of not only non-Orthodox feminists but middle-aged Orthodox feminist trail blazers as well."

These feminists, though, according to the study, come close to being the mythical supermom that can do it all. They are more likely than other American Jewish women to begin families by their mid-20s — "their fertility rates [three to four children] are higher than those of non-Orthodox women" — but they nevertheless are more likely to attain advanced degrees and pursue high-status careers.

More than any other Jewish subgroup, they and their spouses come closest to educational equality, even by secular standards. Additionally, these women "volunteer more time than non-Orthodox Jews," and created within their women's organizations "a cultural ambience which was different than that of male-dominated philanthropies," the report stated.

For women aspiring to leadership positions in these groups, "hard work and organizational ability were as important as the ability to donate money."

Looking forward to the February conference, Greenberg said, "In a way we're fighting for the soul of Orthodoxy in the next generation. Orthodox feminism is about women having some rights and showing some backbone. We need more of that, not simply sitting back and saying everything's OK.

"That cuts across all these issues: women's learning, women's tefillah, women saying Kaddish, marriage and ceremonies, and agunot."

| Home | About Us | Subscription | Advertise on | Current Issue | Regions | Archive | Write to Us | Fresh Ink | Chat | Poll | Quiz | Singles | Feedback |