

Mon, 8 Nov 1999 21:02:21 +1100

"Yvonne Fein" <fradl@ozemail.com.au>

"Women's Tefillah Network " <wtm@shamash.org>

Leyning, you should know, is a dangerous experience in Australia. I refer both to practicing the art, week after week with devoted teacher and fellow students, and actually to standing before the Torah and reading from the parchment, pointing at the words with shaking finger, and reciting each syllable with its appropriate musical cantillation. To do this on the day, tightly encircled by women crowding the scroll, passionate to see it, to be called to it and to be blessed in its presence and its name is at once terrifying, exhilarating, humbling. And, as I say, dangerous.

It is four years since that Simchat Torah when three of us first stood before a small congregation of women to read from the scroll. At that time, neither my fellow leyners nor I had mastered the trop. We simply called women up, facilitated the recital of the blessings and proceeded to read the words in our everyday voices. Actually, our voices trembled and we grappled panic-stricken with the hand-drawn letters that looked so terrifyingly different from our beloved and battered Chumashim from which we had so faithfully studied. The next year, we discovered the Tikkun Korim (a handbook of instruction for readers) and the year after that, we divided up the five sections so that we could learn, almost by heart, the words. But this year, ah, this year, we sought a teacher, a man gentle in mien and manner, who entrusted into our keeping the treasure of the trop. I heard the voices of my fellow leyners give their own uniquely female sound to the ancient tradition. For the first time I heard my own voice soar through the notes, flutter over consonants, shiver upon the vowels and I knew that it was the first time in the tortured tradition of my survivor family - Hasidim on both sides before Auschwitz - that a woman had dared to raise her voice in public and sing to the glory of God...

Why is Torah reading dangerous in Australia? Speaking now for myself, I say it is dangerous because it is a profoundly radicalizing experience. Perhaps those who oppose a woman's right to access ritual are right to be afraid. If they intuit one fraction of the power I experienced when singing those notes and those words, they should tremble. What I realized as I learned, and finally delivered the beauty of the Torah in song, is that I am a Jew in a woman's body. The breath that fuels and feeds my body emerges in song. If am forced to hide my body and my breath away, I am also being forced to deny, to be ashamed and scared of, my very essence. I will not do it. ... Reading in song from the Torah is dangerous, yes, for how can I know where it will finish? It is not given for me to know. But I do know - from that quiet, fragile place inside me which is the source of my breath and my womanhood - that I must continue to do it.

Yvonne Fein is a Melbourne writer, editor and teacher and a former editor of The Melbourne Chronicle and Generation.

Wed, 10 Nov 1999 15:56:09 +0200
Shael Frimer <shaul_f@iftric.co.il>

Dear Ar,

Thanks for the two articles. They were very interesting! As I read Yvonne's article I was thinking, I was taught that doing mitzvot meant getting closer to God and not necessarily doing something that gives me pleasure. her wanting to read the torah seems very self centered (at least the way she expresses it) - wanting to break the chains of male oppression. I wonder if her grandmothers (who were both chassidic - so she said) - were less pious, less committed, less religious, or felt farther away from God because they didn't read from the Torah and didn't put on Tefilin and a Talis. Who's at the center of our religious actions God or us. Maybe the problem is not what we do but how we relate to what we are doing.

Shael

Sun, 14 Nov 1999 13:42:00 +0200
Shira Schmidt <shiras@netvision.net.il>
5 b Kislev

Shalom Prof. Frimer,

Im b'feminism askinan.....I still respectfully beg to differ with you on Orthodox feminism. I feel the dangers and negative outweigh the positive.

I reread the old question I had sent to the then-chief Rabbi of Beer Sheva, Rav Katz. Thank you for digging it out. I thought to myself - "Did I really write that?" Now I remember that my motives in wanting to organize a women's megilla reading weren't so pure. I write that I and some other women for various reasons can't make it to the regular megilla reading in shul because we were busy taking care of small children, etc. . In reality, we could have gone to one of the many later-in-the-night megilla readings by men for women who were busy with small children. So I think one of the reasons in the "etc" was a subconscious "tallis envy" - a term that lately I use when thinking about these issues (I don't mean it pejoratively, and I apply it to my own motives when I was a feminist). Perhaps another factor, is wanting to feel greater participation. Coming from a non-observant background, it took me a long time to understand that participation can be very active, but look passive to the outsiders. I see that here among the Hassidic women in Kiryat Sanz - who feel totally involved as leading participants in a cosmic enterprise, even though most do not attend public tefilla regularly, etc. (but there is probably a much higher percentage of women who daven every morning, and every Rosh Hodesh, in privacy than in the modern orthodox segment of the population).

Sincerely,

Shira Schmidt

Subject: I am a Jew in a womans body.

Date: Tue, 09 Nov 1999 09:32:25 EST

From: "Rivkah Lambert" <rebbitzen@hotmail.com>

To: "Women's Tefillah Network " <wtm@shamash.org>

CC: eadler@btfiloh.org

In Yvonne Fein's beautifully written essay, she wrote, "I am a Jew in a woman's body." A powerful sentiment, poetically expressed. A great sound-bite. I understand the feeling that generates such a comment. But I absolutely cannot accept this reckoning of Jewish women.

In my own struggle to balance the aspects of a Torah life that I love (and there are many) with the forces of Torah life that diminish me (and there are many), I refuse to accept the notion that Jewish women, however we observe our Judaism, are less entitled to be considered Jewish than Jewish men. To state the obvious - Jewish women are also Jews. I trust that Yvonne wasn't promoting the notion that the only real Jews are men, as much as reflecting the way it sometimes feels.

When I teach about these matters, I always mention that I believe that non-Orthodox feminists have erred in deputizing women to be, in effect, Jewish men, by eliminating the barriers to public prayer. To my mind, this "solution" simply perpetuates the notion that masculine forms of religious expression are "the real Judaism".

Frieda Birnbaum, who, it seems, has the capacity to remember everything, will hopefully help me reconstruct a conversation that took place on this list (but could have been KOLISHA many years ago). Someone once posed the question, "Why do we, as women, pursue an enduring emphasis on access to sifrei Torah, tallis and tefillin?" She was answered by someone saying that these items are the sancta of Judaism.

That has always troubled me. Although I can see, without any effort at all, how it can seem that way, I wonder whether we are dealing with a mirage. Why would G-d make nearness to a sefer Torah the ultimate, supreme spiritual high, and then deny women access? Could it be that the underlying premise is wrong?

Everytime the sefer Torah passes near me in shul on its way to or from the aron kodesh, I cry because I am so moved. And everytime I am in a service where it doesn't come anywhere near me, I also cry, because I feel so excluded. A deep but honest question is - Do I cry because I am on a spiritual level to perceive the holiness of the sefer Torah? Or do I cry because I feel excluded and am so grateful to be included sometimes? Even more painful to consider - is our longing intensified by the fact that we only get access when a man says it's okay? If every Orthodox woman everywhere had as much access to the sefer Torah as Orthodox men do, how long would it take for us women to stop crying and shaking when we get near a sefer Torah? A few months? A few years? A generation?

Sometimes I feel that our discussions here lean toward the error of longing for what G-d gave men while ignoring the need to search out what G-d gave women. There is so much attention to communal prayer (granted, that's what the list is FOR). But rarely do we talk about other ways to grow in Torah. I wonder whether we are so focused on public prayer and all the pain it engenders, whether fighting for our tefilla groups or dealing with insensitivities in "regular" minyanim, to the exclusion of other experiences of growing spiritually, that we have missed something very important.

I work SO HARD to construct a Judaism that carves out uniquely feminine space. But am I kidding myself? I wonder that all the time. I really want to believe that there are two paths to G-d and that the male pathway (especially mixed-gender public prayer) is not designed to meet the spiritual needs of women.

I want to grow in ways that G-d desires, in ways that G-d prepared for me, in ways that are more natural to me as a woman. These ways are much more subtle and fraught with difficulties because we live in a world that valorizes the male pathways and doesn't know, nurture or honor the female ones. Knowing, nurturing and honoring female pathways to G-d is very, very difficult.

It is very scary to me to think that I might be wrong about this notion that "real Judaism" includes both female and male ritual and spiritual pathways. It scares me to think that, after all, G-d *really prefers* to be honored in the way that men pray.

For now, I can't accept that G-d made one style of prayer truly supreme and then told women we cannot/must not/should not. Just contemplating that makes my head feel like imploding.

There must be another resolution.

Rivkah Lambert

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Rivkah Y. Lambert, Ph.D.
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A prayer has come down to us from Pearl, the rabbi of Berditchev's wife. Whenever she kneaded and baked the loaves for the sabbath, she prayed: "Lord of the World, I beg you to help me that, when my husband Levi Yitzhak says the blessing upon these loaves on the sabbath, he may have in his mind what I have in my mind this very hour that I knead and bake them."

Martin Buber, Tales of the Hasidim, Early Masters