

**THE INGEBORG, TAMARA & YONINA RENNERT WOMEN IN JUDAISM FORUM**

**JEWISH WOMEN CHANGING AMERICA:  
CROSS GENERATIONAL-CONVERSATIONS**

**SUNDAY, 30 OCTOBER 2005**

**PANEL DISCUSSION 3: "CHANGING JUDAISM"**

**Janet Jakobsen:** This first panel this afternoon is going to look at changing Judaism. Actually, it was the first question raised during last night's panel: How do we think about changing Jewish practice? How do we think about changing Jewish religious communities? So it's obviously a topic that's on a number of people's minds, and we've been able to bring together a really great panel to discuss that with you.

As always, the moderator will set the context for us, and then the panelists will speak with each other. And then we'll get a chance to hear from all of you. I look forward to another really interesting conversation.

We have with us today a particularly impressive moderator in Judith Plaskow, who, again, many of you already know. She is a professor of religious studies at Manhattan College and a Jewish feminist theologian. She has been teaching, writing and speaking about feminist studies in religion and Jewish feminism for over 30 years. She's been a leader at the American Academy of

Religion, and was, in fact, the president of the American Academy of Religion.

With Carol Christ, she co-edited *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, and she edited *Weaving The Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, both anthologies of feminist theology used in many religious studies courses, as well as women's studies courses. With Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, she co-founded *The Journal of Feminist Studies and Religion*, which is a very important journal in religious studies. In fact, my first publication was there, so I like it a lot.

Her book, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism From A Feminist Perspective*, has become a Jewish feminist classic. And a recent collection of her essays, *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism and Sexual Ethics 1972-2003*, was published last year by Beacon Press.

In other words, once again we have someone who could not be better situated to lead our discussion this morning: Judith Plaskow.

**Judith Plaskow:** Thank you so much, Janet, and welcome back everybody. In the first two sessions we heard about Jewish

women's involvement in feminist efforts to change society and the Jewish community. In this panel we are going to focus on feminist efforts to change Judaism.

Obviously, this has come up already in the conference. Feminists have sought to reshape many aspects of Jewish life, and the shifts in women's roles and participation over the last 35 years have been truly extraordinary, especially when considered in the timeline of Jewish history.

Letty [Cottin Pogrebin] mentioned many of those changes last night, but let me just refer to some of them again. It's almost hard to remember that in many non-Orthodox synagogues in the late 1960s, women were not counted in *minyanim*. This was true in the Reform temple in which I grew up. I have to pinch myself sometimes to remember that. Because, of course, now a whole generation has grown up taking for granted that women can be rabbis and cantors, prayer leaders and Torah readers. Within Orthodoxy there is a vibrant Jewish Orthodox feminist alliance, a network of women's prayer groups, a decreasing barrier between women and the *Safer Torah*. A growing acceptance of *B'not mitzvah*. Learning opportunities for women have exploded across the Jewish world. And learned women are accepted and recognized in most places in the Jewish world. Women have created new

rituals, beginning with naming ceremonies for girls, but moving out from there to almost every occasion that one can imagine.

Feminists have created a whole new literature: commentaries, histories, biographies, liturgies, theologies, and so on. Related to these changes in women's roles in the communities, the Reform and Reconstruction in seminaries now ordain queer Jews, and there is increasing pressure for acknowledgment or acceptance of Jewish gays and lesbians within the Conservative and Orthodox movements.

And yet—and again, this has been referred to in the course of the conference, especially this morning—a great deal remains to be done. It seems to me, anyway, that in parts of the non-Orthodox community, progress toward equality is stalled. It's rare not to find lip service to the concept of equality, but there are often significant gaps between theory and reality. And that means that we are dealing with an aura of obfuscation around these issues that was not the case 30 years ago, when the opposition was more blatant and, in some ways, easier to deal with.

In general, there's been far more willingness to accept women in leadership roles than there has been to re-examine the content

of tradition, to change liturgy—especially language about God, as Sally Gottesman mentioned this morning—or to incorporate the incredible new scholarship that's out there on women, into Jewish curriculum on all levels, from kindergarten through seminary education.

In the late 1960s—and maybe this was a part of our utopian vision that Paula [Hyman] talked about this morning—feminists had hoped that women becoming rabbis would change what it meant to be a rabbi. But it seems to me that by and large that has not happened. Women are opting out of certain levels of the rabbinate, rather than transforming the rabbinate.

I'm still waiting for single Jews to rise up, form a movement and challenge the continuing couple norm of Judaism. And, in a similar vein, I think acceptance for gays and lesbians has often been predicated on the expectation that we will accept this norm of coupled-ness, and enter into marriage-like relationships.

At the same time that there is great ferment within some segments of the Orthodox community, the Orthodox right wing is also gaining in visibility and power. So we have an agenda that could easily keep us here for the rest of the afternoon, but we only have an hour-and-a-half.

The conference organizers raised many issues for our panel. I have asked our distinguished panelists to please begin by addressing one question: How do you understand the work that you and other feminists have done in your specific contexts to be related to the broader task of changing Judaism?

I have asked the panelists to speak for five minutes, in the hopes that we can have more time for conversation among ourselves and with you. And I have a seasonal gourd that I will wave at that point.

(laughter)

What I am going to do is to introduce the whole panel, right up front, very briefly, because you have extended bios in your packets, so please feel free to consult them. And we'll speak in alphabetical order, as the other panelists have done.

Sue Levi Elwell serves as director of the Pennsylvania Council of the Union of Reform Judaism. She is the editor of *Open Door*, the Reform Passover Haggadah, and co-editor with Rebecca Alpert and Shirley Idleson of *Lesbian Rabbis: The First Generation*.

Judy Hauptman is a Barnard graduate and the E. Billi Ivry Professor of Talmud and Rabbinic Culture at the Jewish

Theological Seminary. She has founded a free walk-in High-Holiday service in Greenwich Village. You're all welcome, next year. You can find it on the Web. And her book on *Mishnah and Tosefta* has just been published.

Norma Baumwell Joseph is associate professor of religion and chair of the Department of Religion at Concordia University, and director of the women and religion specialization there. She teaches and does research in the areas of women and Judaism, Jewish law, and the Canadian Jewish experience. Her recent research focuses on food and cultural identity.

Lori Hope Lefkovitz holds the Gottesman Chair in Gender and Judaism at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, where she directs Kolot: The Center for Jewish Women's and Gender Studies. Kolot sponsors the feminist Web site, [ritualwell.org](http://ritualwell.org). Among Lori's publications is *Shaping Losses: Cultural Memory and the Holocaust*.

Danya Ruttenberg, who is carrying the burden of our cross-generational conversation this afternoon, is editor of the anthology *Yentl's Revenge: The Next Wave of Jewish Feminism*. She is contributing editor to a number of journals, and her writing has appeared in numerous publications. She's currently in her

fourth year at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the University of Judaism in L.A.

Sue?

**Sue Levi Elwell:** When a woman comes out as a lesbian, which is, I've learned, a process that continues throughout one's life, one of the first questions people ask is, When did you know?

Sitting with you today, standing, with these distinguished and honored colleagues and a room full of many old friends and people who have taught me, I would like to address that question of to the issue of changing Judaism. When did I know that this is my life work?

I was blessed to grow up in a family and community of proud and deeply committed reform Jews. Eight years in a girls' summer camp, and four years in a girls' high school provided models of strong communities where women's leadership was the norm, and women's voices were celebrated.

As a graduate student in Jewish history, I began to uncover the stories of our mothers and soon realized that the entire fabric of Jewish life and thought was, in Cynthia Ozick's word,



"frayed." My subsequent work, and that of each of the women on this panel and so many other colleagues, has been to live a Judaism that is repaired, made whole by the inclusion of women's wisdom, women's insights, and women's questions.

My colleagues and I in the Reform movement, where I now spend all my time working, are working on realizing a vision of an inclusive Judaism that embraces tradition and innovation. A Judaism that teaches tolerance and respect. A Judaism of rigorous study and passionate engagement in the world. We work every day to live a Judaism that serves as the foundation of vibrant, functional, resilient, and nurturing communities—a very tall order. We work at it. We stumble often. We're blinded by our biases and our stereotypes. And yet, we trudge on.

Our sages teach us it is not up to us to complete the work, but neither are we free to desist from it. So I'd like to share with you, in a very few minutes, how the Reform movement is addressing some of these issues, and how we're not.

I'd like to share with you first how we're set up. We have three institutions in our movement that guide us. We have a seminary. We have a rabbinic association and we have a congregational body.

I feel very good about our seminary these days. In addition to having an extraordinary president, David Ellenson, we also have a dean who is the co-editor with me of the *Lesbian Rabbi Book*, Shirley Idleson—a first, I believe. We also now, at all of our four campuses throughout the world—we have three campuses here stateside and one in Jerusalem—we also now have classes explicitly on Jewish women's studies. Gender is no longer an issue that can be ignored in any of the classes, in any of the courses throughout the curriculum of the Hebrew Union College.

In our rabbinic association, the CCAR, we have just chosen a new director, and unfortunately it's not yet a woman and I am disappointed. Nevertheless, we celebrated last year our first female president, Rabbi Janet Marder. She was an excellent first because she is one of the smartest rabbis any of us know, an extraordinary sermonizer. As I told Judith at lunch, no one could criticize Janet for anything. She is an extraordinary person and a stellar leader. And we were all very proud to have her as the president of the CCAR.

I also want to share with you: Jackie Ellenson is in the room, and she is the director of the WRN, the Women's Rabbinic Network, a network of all Reform rabbis. And over the years

we've become increasingly strong. We're delighted to finally have a paid director, one of our own, another rabbi. And we, together, have found great strength. We support one another and we also move ahead on a variety of feminist issues and issues of concern to us, and our movement and the world.

Our congregational body is the body for which I work, the Union for Reform Judaism. And I will say a little bit more about how we work in our congregations because I believe that we are making many changes out there, even with all of the challenges that Judith outlined, although I would like to take issue with her comments about women rabbis because I think women rabbis have been very strong agents for change. And when lay leaders and rabbis work together, as feminists, communities really do change. I'm going to talk about that in just a minute. But I want to share with you one of the congregational body's partners—not just the congregations are represented—we also have an affiliate called the Women of Reform Judaism. I've been honored to work with them to help them claim feminism, to claim "the f-word," as some of us would say.

And I guess I've run out of my five minutes; I'm going to speak very quickly. The Women of Reform Judaism, I believe, are also moving as a very strong body to share some of these issues with

us. We have been addressing, in our congregational life, through the Reform movement, issues of eating disorders. And we produced one of the first volumes on this. And also, we're working on self-destructive behaviors that afflict many of our young people.

Women in the rabbinate are changing congregations because of exactly the areas that Judith outlined: transformation of life-cycle celebrations, changing God language, being present in relationships, family after family. We are there with you, we women rabbis, in all the movements. By changing ideas about what a rabbi looks like, how a rabbi can teach and the Torah that we are teaching, as informed by the insights of our feminist teachers, we have begun to transform Judaism.

We'll talk more about this with the other panelists and I look very much forward to all of your questions. Thank you.

**Judith Hauptman:** My first paragraph is gone because last night Letty, and this afternoon Judith, talked about the transformations in the Conservative movement. So I'll just make two very brief comments. Liturgical change is something that the Conservative movement is grappling with, is having a hard time dealing with. Our most recent version of *Siddur Sim Shalom* has

pages 122A and 122B, I think they're called, so we have a choice either to include the matriarchs or not to include the matriarchs. As far as the couples norm that was referred to before: I live in Manhattan, but I tend to think that's really not the norm in many synagogues that I have become familiar with.

Challenges: the conservative movement, leadership and laity, do not understand that the feminist change was made within the framework of halakah, Jewish law, and was driven by ethics, not convenience. This is a point that I keep referring to; I keep coming back to because it has very important implications, as I will now explain.

People often see change in the Conservative movement as giving in, as succumbing to popular culture. They do not understand that this is precisely—"this" meaning rabbinic liberation, reinterpretations of text, and so on—this is precisely how change came about in the past. And this is authentic Judaism.

I don't think there's any serious attempt on the part of the leadership of the Conservative movement to explain to the laity what the system for change is. Does it matter? In the past, when I've talked about these things in public, people say to

me, enough already, the Conservative movement is so transformed by the feminist movement, what are you complaining about? If the changes have been made, why does it matter for what reasons they were made?

And my answer is, yes, it really does matter. I'll give you two examples, a narrow example and then a broader example. If accepting women into rabbinical school, which of course was done already at JTS 20 years ago, is merely "giving in" to popular American feminist pressure, then the heads of the rabbinical school will not rethink the education of rabbis, but merely make room for women. The curriculum will not change and neither will the culture. Women will not feel welcome. The rabbinical school will not be able to explain to future congregants why the ordination of female rabbis is legitimate. And therefore, they will function less well in their jobs. That's one example.

The second, broader example: if the reasons for change—the reasons for, and not just the observance of the changes—are not understood, the leadership of the movement will not be able to figure out successfully the directions in which the movement needs to head next. One example is full acceptance of gays. People need to understand that we cannot draw a line and say, Oh, this ethically driven change we'll accept, the feminist

change, but this other ethically driven change, equality for gays, we are not going to accept.”

If you understand how all of this operates—and I’m a professor of Talmud, so I speak to you with that authority and with the past sitting very heavily on my shoulders—the struggle is to get people to understand that Conservative Judaism is not “Orthodox Lite.” It’s not fewer demands, but a philosophy of accommodation to evolving ethical sensitivities that, again, I say is what it always was.

Now, to address Judith’s question, feminist scholars in Conservative Judaism are often key activists. It’s the scholars who were able to bring about change because we speak and because we try to widely disseminate our ideas.

I became a feminist, as a number of people in this room who knew me before will remember, because I found—when I sat with colleagues as *Rat Nashim* 30 years or so ago—I found the feminist critique of Judaism irresistible. I would bring texts to the group and try to transmit what they were saying from the old perspective. And my female friends would raise my consciousness and give me new insight into these very same texts.

So the logic is extraordinarily compelling, and if feminist scholars can convince other women of the patriarchal stance of Judaism—and I really do refer to the past and not so much the present—then women today will become persuaded and become activists for change.

Two more paragraphs. It seems to me that today there are egalitarian Jews and non-egalitarian Jews. That's a more significant distinction than denominations. And here's where I'll do a little bit of bashing of others: I don't know of any good reason that Orthodox rabbis do not institute feminist change. I have trouble participating in services in an Orthodox setting because I think the Orthodox resistance to change is based more on prejudice than on principle. I'm not angry with the rabbis of old who lived in a patriarchal culture; they did not rise above their social surroundings. I'll leave my other example of animal sacrifices out.

But today, with our awareness of the anti-female bias of traditional Judaism and with our knowledge of the ability of Judaism to change by implementing ancient mechanisms already put in place by rabbis and the Talmud 2000 years ago, there is no reason to continue to discriminate against women. If women—in large numbers, as I think they are—choose to adopt a lifestyle



in which they are treated as less than equal because there are rewards that they get in such a system, that is their right. So I see my job as a feminist scholar to articulate clearly, early, and as often as possible, the truth about Judaism and its history of halakic change and accommodation to social ethical critique and evolving ethical sensibilities. Thank you.

**Norma Joseph:** Hello. I am very pleased to be here. My daughter is a Barnard alum and it's exciting to be back here. The very premise of the conference—"Jewish Women Changing America"—is that the word "change" is a positive word, and that the action is a value that we are all in favor of. That change is, in fact, a good thing.

But as many of you have already alluded to, in the Orthodox world the word "change" immediately—especially if it's about halakah, Jewish law and ritual—immediately elicits very negative and frightened responses. So let me begin with a minor history lesson.

Innovation of Orthodoxy is a reality. In the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, Orthodoxy emerged from internal divisions and opposition to Enlightenment. In other words, it itself is a new and radical movement. It was

incredibly successful, and most successful at marketing itself as the one movement that was the direct and continuous heir of all of the 2000- or 5000-year history that had preceded it. It was the only legitimate heir of traditional Judaism. In fact, when Rabbi Moses Sofer, known as Hatam Sofer, in 1819 said, "*Hadash assur min hatorah*" (all that is new is forbidden in the Torah)—which is a ridiculous statement—everybody took on this notion that Orthodoxy stood for no change, but continuity. And that the only way for us to survive the demographic challenges as have recently been written about was to maintain Orthodoxy in its no-change attitude.

But that, of course, flies in the face of history. Orthodoxy *has* changed; even at the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth, there were incredible departures. Such as the departure that Orthodoxy accepted *humra* (stringency); in other words, Orthodoxy doesn't have to be Orthodoxy-heavy either. This notion that what once might have practiced by the elite should be the norm for everybody was a brand-new innovation. And the notion that what had been a *minhag* is now *halakah* is another innovation. So Orthodoxy itself stands on the back of an innovative agenda, but convinced everybody it was non-innovative.

If I get up and talk about change, I'm going to be lambasted by Orthodox Jews, which I often am—I'm hit on all sides from everybody. In point of fact, Orthodoxy has convinced the world that it does not welcome change, but then looks at thousands of years of responsal literature that legitimates changes in every aspect of life and of Judaism.

Particularly when it comes to women's issues, this cry of "no change" is heard loud and clear. The clash between those seeking change and those upholding the unchanging nature of religious law and authority has generated increasing tension for Orthodox feminism in general, and for the Orthodox leadership specifically.

Change and innovation are not anathema in Jewish law, even in terms of women's involvement. And there are three areas that we can look at, emanating out of and within the Jewish Orthodox movement in which change has been radical and welcome. For example, education: now, the education of Jewish women in Judaica and in Jewish texts is heavily based in the Orthodox world, welcomed, and in fact has been written about by many male rabbinic scholars as a mitzvah, as a wonderful thing. And yet, the acknowledgment that this emanates out of feminist concern and agenda is denied consistently. So we'll find many women in

advanced Jewish educational institutions studying Torah, Talmud and Jewish philosophy, even Kabbalah, and they say, "But I'm not a feminist. That 'f-word.' I'm Orthodox and therefore I can't be a feminist." Nonetheless, the changes have taken place and have yielded an awful lot in transformation of the Jewish Orthodox world today.

The second arena is ritual practice. Now, these changes were not always heralded or received well, but many of them were. For example, increased ritual participation by women in holiday rituals, in prayer, and in attention to details such as head covering or *mikvah* were definitely seen as something to be applauded and welcomed by the Orthodox leadership, as signs of female piety and obedience.

But other efforts by Orthodox women to increase ritual obligations and ritual participation have been seen as threats. Orthodoxy values ritual obligation, but nonetheless exempted women from a number of rituals. When women started taking on some of these rituals, half of them were applauded and half of them were denied. Women developed a sense of female activity in the Orthodox world, but the rabbinic authority was pushed against the wall and then started pushing back, saying, "This is

not a sign of your obedience and piety; this is a sign of your rebelliousness.”

The third area is in terms of prayer and liturgy. In some ways it's very interesting to see the ways in which Orthodox women and Orthodox feminists have taken on issues of prayer, not just in women's prayer groups but perhaps *especially* in women's prayer groups. Remember, the notion of the denial of change in ritual practice particularly distinguishes this group. So we have a group of women facing a paradox where the women themselves remain Orthodox but challenge the very system of traditional religious authority and practice that defines their lives.

They challenge Judaism. They challenge the system in the name of the system, in order to keep the system going. The dilemma facing Orthodox women is how to accommodate a commitment to halakah and its currently, but not forever, male rabbinical hierarchical system with a personal passion for greater ritual agency. How to accept a centuries-old legal structure while pressing for change. How to align a sense of distinctive gender roles without succumbing to the non-egalitarianism. How to sustain a sense of justice in Judaism and ethics.

Which brings me to my last minute and last point: I want to talk for a minute about *aguna* activism. *Aguna* activism, for me, highlights the conflicts, fractious identities and ruptures for women in the Orthodox community. As some of you know, it's an area I've been active in. The conflicts between Orthodoxy and feminism perhaps reach the most difficult, most insoluble, and most offensive situation when, in *aguna*, a woman who can't receive her Jewish divorce stands before us. How do we understand a commitment to Jewish law that enables a lawless man to tyrannize a law-abiding woman? How do we adjust to a concomitant acceptance of rabbinic authority that is defined and legislated by a male elite that is unable or unwilling to listen to women or to hear them? What do we do with our respect for the law and lawmakers, while knowing that the law regarding *gitten* is unacceptable in its treatment of women?

And that rabbinic authority is worse than patriarchal; it is often corrupt. How do we place women's experience at the center of our stage, as Orthodox feminists? How do we deal with it? If Orthodoxy is about accepting the law and rabbinic authority, and Orthodox feminists respect the law and rabbinic authority, *aguna* activism is about doubting and challenging and even contradicting rabbinic authority. It is about washing our dirty linen in public. It is about questioning the very basis of one's

own beliefs. And I speak to you now out of my own angst: it is to engage in an existential ordeal. No one can claim that Judaism is absolutely just anymore. No one can say that because the Torah proclaims *tzedek tzedek tirdof*, passionately pursue justice, we are therefore a just society.

No one can claim that women are protected or held in high esteem by Jewish law and heritage. No one can claim that there are no legal problems, just human ones. No one can claim that feminists are unreasonable or off-the-wall or anti-Jewish or anti-religion. No one can claim that the feminist critique is unfounded. No one should claim that Jewish law does not need to be revised or amended. And I say this knowing that I am part of a community that reveres that law, reveres a rabbinic authority, and needs to find a way legally and efficiently and practically and right now to deal with this.

My final point is this: don't say, "Why should these women stay within the Orthodox community?" These are women who *choose* to be Orthodox. They choose to accept the system that had been, until now, male-defined rabbinic law. They choose to accept to live within the rabbinic system, and if feminism is anything, it's about giving women the right to choose. So don't turn to women

and say, "Leave it." Turn to a woman and say, "How can I help you?" Thank you.

**Lori Lefkowitz:** Good afternoon, everybody. It's wonderful to be in this company. The two areas of feminist impact on Judaism that have been distinctively effective from within Reconstructionist institutions are, first, the area of liturgical and ritual innovation, and second, the implications of feminist analysis for Jewish practice. The area that I would identify as a place of shared success and ongoing effort among Jewish feminists generally is in remediating the sexism of classical Judaism in its exclusionary practices, and in identifying and preliminarily addressing sites of misogyny in Judaism's textual sources and traditions and consequent legislation and religious practices.

The two areas that I would name as ongoing persistent challenges for Jewish feminists of all denominational stripes are, first, as has often been mentioned, the imbalance of power in Jewish religious life and the predominance of men in Jewish religious leadership and positions of prestige, and second, the need to bring the frontier of feminist gender and queer theory to Jewish studies and then from Jewish studies to create applications in Jewish practice.



The Reconstructionist *Kol Haneshamah* prayer book series, with its experimental names for God, its variety of blessing formulations, the sense of openness and multiplicity, reflects an immanent theology and this denomination's willingness to imaginatively reconstruct tradition to accommodate contemporary worshipers and feminist convictions. By contrast, [ritualwell.org](http://ritualwell.org), deliberately not a Reconstructionist product but a nondenominational feminist resource that is a project of Kolot at RRC and was co-created with Ma'yan, is feminist in the variety of innovative ceremonial and ritual possibilities that it makes available. It's a democratic vehicle for feminists to share creative Jewish rituals. Ritualwell's feminist relationship to the tradition is remedial and varies from contribution to contribution; some are subtle modifications in the direction of egalitarian inclusion, and others are more radically inventive.

Because RRC, the Reconstructionist college where rabbis are trained, is almost exclusively a training institution for rabbis, the faculty has developed a habit of thinking about how academic insights and Jewish knowledge translate for the Jewish community and the practical rabbinate. And Kolot itself, which is an outreach program that includes community-learning series

in Jewish feminism, is part of that larger effort. So, Kolot's Wainheart Writer in Residence [program] brings a feminist Jewish scholar to the local community annually. Our widely imitated conference on Judaism, "Body Image and Food," which led to the development of the Rosh Hodesh project for teens; a planned interdisciplinary conference on masculinity and ethnicity, "The Case of the Jewish Father"; [and] a new project that we are developing on reanimating *Ta'anit Esther*, the Fast of Esther, are among the ways that Kolot, as a project of RRC, works to bring Jewish feminism into the Jewish community.

That said, although many members of the faculty are doing research on the frontiers of their fields in gender studies—I'm thinking of Sarra Lev, who does work on transgender in rabbinic literature; Jacob Staub, who is looking at queering spiritual direction—in spite of faculty doing this work, the rabbinical school curriculum has little room for faculty to teach the fullness of cutting-edge scholarship.

The real work of queering Jewish studies, by which I mean undertaking a systematic review of all aspects of Jewish textuality and practice to defamiliarize our assumptions about gender and sexuality, still lies in the future. We might ask about Samson and Delilah's sadomasochism, or Jacob's passing as

a man, or women switching from Yiddish to Hebrew as having been a kind of functional gender masquerade. Or what's going on when Jewish men and a madonna strap on leather? The extent that these questions still feel like scandalous reading practices exposes the extent to which the old parochialisms are still in place in the field of Jewish studies.

The assumptions about what credentials qualify one for a prestigious career still largely favor those women who had come from what had once been all-male educational universes and institutions, into which women are now admitted to the extent that they masquerade as *yeshiva buchers* [literally, Yeshiva school boys]. And, as has often been said, like all the other movements in Judaism, all three Reconstructionism organizations—the seminary, the rabbinical association, and the lay association—are now, as they almost always have been, headed by straight men. The most highly paid pulpit positions and community positions still go to men.

So, to conclude, Jewish feminists in all the progressive movements have somewhat successfully and deliberately addressed the issues of separate spheres in school and in shul. Equal access. We're all grappling with misogyny in our texts, from biblical origin stories through the commenting tradition, in the

construction of the female body in the legal tradition, in property and marital law, as we've heard.

We've all looked at the language of prayer and the renderings of God, the issue of male ritual garb as normative, the literature and practices of Jewish women in history, which are lesser valued and often lost. But we are in conversation about how to honor the forgotten practices of our foremothers, some of which seem sexist to us. Whether to adopt or adapt normative male Jewish religious and spiritual practices for ourselves and our daughters? We are asking what is gained and what is lost by retaining separatisms related to the specificity of the female body, such as *mikvah* or menstruation rituals? The question of the category of woman—the basis of this conference itself—is still, to me, a vexed boundary issue in Judaism.

And one about which the Jewish people, following the Jews in the academy, remains in deep confusion. Thank you.

**Danya Ruttenberg:** Since Judy Hauptman did quite a number on the Conservative movement, I'm freed up to speak a little more broadly. First, I'd like to raise a couple of questions to which I don't have any ready answers, but perhaps we can discuss them later.

First, the issue of denominationalism around which this panel is organized. As more and more Jews and Jewish communities begin to identify as post-denominational, or outside a denominational framework, I'd like to ask how will that affect either the attempt to make change from within the denominational framework, where movements by their nature have an inherent organization that can be helpful or obstacle-raising, or outside of it, where we might have more freedom, but less organization?

I'd also like to ask, as Sepharadi and Mizrahi voices are very slowly becoming more integrated into a more general Jewish discourse, How can we as religious communities take seriously the mandate to create spaces, whether it's prayer melodies or traditions or something reflective of *Klal Israel*, of all Judaism, without becoming tokenizing in a way that's problematic?

I don't have answers to either of these questions, but thought I'd put that out there. The next piece I'd like to talk about is reclamation. In the last few years I've observed a renewed interest in feminists going back through the "garbage pile," to see which parts of tradition, initially maybe discarded as a necessary part of feminist process, might be worth cleaning off,

repairing, and putting to some use? I see this impulse in many aspects of Third Wave feminism in general, such as the recent explosion of feminist knitting circles or feminist burlesque. But I think this approach may be more useful and challenging to us over here in Judaism. It demands a comfort with paradox and an ability to acknowledge that a text or ritual may simultaneously have problematic meanings *and* rich spiritual depth.

In reappropriation, we cannot only access the full range of treasures available in our tradition, but we also have the potential to use all of the critical tools at our disposal to subvert or disarm some of Judaism's most problematic tacks, to see that they be used—God willing—for good and not for evil. Just as the feminist revolts from the left have had a tremendous impact on more traditionally Jewish circles, I think, too, as more and more women become learned in traditional texts on a very high level, we'll see less-traditionally religious women and men willing to consider new uses for discarded ideas, and perhaps to transform their relationship to Judaisms that have otherwise seemed irrelevant, outdated or too problematic to engage.

Another thing I've noticed is that feminist thought is slowly becoming more implicit in Jewish theology without being named as explicitly feminist. And generally, for this sort of development, I look forward to the messianic age in which we don't need gender studies as a field at all, but it's not uncomplicated.

I recently encountered a relatively minor example of this that I think illustrates the dilemma. After hearing about a friend's work on domestic abuse survivors' relationships to Episcopalian liturgy on sin and repentance, I was inspired to give a *d'var Torah*, a sermon, over Rosh Hashanah about certain types of obstacles to the *tshuvah* (repentance) process that maybe we all encounter. Since I was speaking to a diverse crowd, I shaped the *d'var* to try to address the more general human concerns underlying my friend's thesis. And while in the end, I think it was a more accessible *drash* for more people in my choice to do that, I was absolutely aware that in the process I was rendering the abuse survivors' experiences invisible.

I think it's vitally important to present feminist theology, ethics, analysis, and interpretation as mainstream Judaism. That ultimately is how we will make important, real, lasting change.

And yet, we also must remain aware of the price that comes with this.

For each of us who are out there trying to sneak feminism into the orange juice of the average American Jew without their noticing, there need to be other people who are keeping an eye out to make sure that not too many important balls get dropped in the process. We need both.

As ideas that were once radical become absorbed into the mainstream, we also need to keep an eye on what products are being sold, under what names. As Judith Plaskow already noted, the rhetoric of feminism, female empowerment, multiculturalism and the like are being used by the very people who are refusing funding, denying tenure, or undermining plans for a daycare program, to say nothing of charging exorbitant prices for education programs that only a select few can afford to attend. This passive aggressive pseudo feminism is, of course, hitting hardest those who lack privilege and/or have not yet in their careers attained a measure of security and power. In some ways, we need the old feminist hermeneutics of suspicion, now more than ever, and we need to have vigilance to insure that, whether or not there is a women's Passover seder with a Miriam's cup,



the hosting organization has a fair and equitable employment practice.

Our feminist approaches and strategies need to continue to shift and evolve in this slippery new environment to ensure that meaningful Jewish changes accompany the rhetoric of Jewish change. And I have more to say, but let's go to Q&A.

**Judith Plaskow:** The panelists have raised so many rich issues, it's difficult to know where to pick up. To begin the conversation, I'd like to have a few minutes of conversation among the panelists before we open things up to the larger audience.

Certainly one thing that I'm hearing in a number of your remarks is how do we mix feminist ideas into the orange juice, to use your metaphor, Danya. Or the whole issue of canon that you were raising, Lori, that I see has its analog in the university. If we make room for the new feminist scholarship, then we will have to take out our unit on *Pirke Avot* (a tractate of the Mishnah), and how can we possibly do that? The struggles within the academy over what constitutes knowledge and what constitutes knowledge that needs to be passed on—and while this is being played out on the seminary level, really, on every curriculum

level we need to be introducing new feminist material. That's one issue that I wonder if we might address: How do we bring the fruits of the work that's been done over the last 30 years into all levels of education?

**Judith Hauptman:** JTS rethinks its curriculum every eight to ten years. It's about to do that. Listening to what Lori said about no room and all that, I simply don't accept that. There are so many different ways of making room.

It just doesn't make sense to me, to say, "It can't be." What you have to do is you have to start with priorities. And I want to make a distinction right now: there's feminist *material*, which is the word you just used, and there's feminist *approach*. And feminist approach does not take any time whatsoever. I remember, maybe it was 10 or 15 years ago, I was teaching Talmud from *Ketubot*, it was about marital contracts, and I had feminist students in the room who happened to have been women, who kept saying to me, "Just because you're teaching material about women, don't think that you're doing something feminist in this room." And the truth is, I didn't get it. It was only 10 or 15 years ago, but I just didn't get it. In the interim, I finally got it. And this year I'm teaching *tyral* from a different tract, also on marital matters. And nobody has yet complained.

Either that says something about the students, or it says something about me. I don't know. But there is resistance, resistance to change, that the curriculum has to overcome. I can only hope that when we do sit down at JTS in the near future that these kinds of issues will be raised and it will be resolved in acceptable ways. And I hope there's going to be enough pressure from women on the faculty, from men on the faculty, and from students who may even be involved in this, and whose voices we need to hear so that we can accommodate it.

**Lori Lefkowitz:** That's very helpful. Faculty themselves are often largely uneducated in gender theory and critical theory. And the first step in this process is to commit funds to informal education of faculty by experts—not necessarily in Jewish studies, but in gender and theory and the edge of scholarship—who would teach us to do theory seminars. Then we need to incentivize our faculty with dollars to work on new syllabi, and to adapt the syllabi that we have. Institutions need to make a commitment to that. It's a lot of work to develop a syllabus. People are teaching the same courses year after year, and we are in love with the texts that we teach, and we are in love with the way that we teach them. But it's very exciting to rework that material. That takes time, and time is only purchased with money. One of the things that I felt last

night was that the unstated word of the evening was exhaustion. That problem—of having too much to do, of being overwhelmed—underlies all of our lives, and we need to incentivize with dollars, give people time off to rework their syllabi, to look with some attention at curricula.

And then, every shul in America needs to make sure that the adult education programs and the scholars-in-residence who they bring in are people doing this work, teaching this new canon. The Jewish community is very interested in it. Jewish women's studies is sexy and interesting and engaging. But we need to organize by having speakers bureaus and speakers series. I know that the Jewish Women's Archive has made some efforts in that direction. And then it needs to happen at the level of the institutions that are educating educators for everything from preschool through high school. So it's a big project.

**Judith Plaskow:** Many of the challenges that we're talking about come up within particular denominations, whether we're talking about curricula change or educating faculty. We are really looking at the structures of denominations. Are there ways that we can offer more support to each other across those lines? Sometimes I feel, Norma, as if the participation of non-Orthodox women is perceived as delegitimizing Orthodox causes. I don't

know whether that's true, and what might be done about it, if it is true.

**Norma Joseph:** In some circles you might be right: the participation of women who are not Orthodox might appear to some members as a problem. They stand for change, and we stand for no change. So in reaching across the boundary, people have to stop saying, "Aside from the Orthodox, we do this." And the Orthodox have to stop saying, "They do that, but we . . ." We need to revamp our language of change and of Judaism and begin to share those very texts that indicate, that show that our history is full of a variety of tools that we could use that might become feminist-friendly, texts that are feminist-friendly, and historical sources.

Certainly, over the last 30 years—look, when we started 35 years ago, there were almost no sources. Okay, there was Dona Gracia, and everybody likes to forget that she was Sephardic.

(laughter)

But now the number of sources, the scholarship that has come out of the academic scholarly Jewish world, is incredible. It's rich. It's varied. It's distinctive. It uses many different

kinds of feminist theories because there isn't one kind. We all know pieces of it, so what we need to do is begin to share that across any line. And then, make that knowledge available in educational environments, from kindergarten on up. Because one of the biggest problems is our kids aren't learning, not just theory. They're not learning the actual content.

We still seldom hear about matriarchs. Forget about Asenat Barzani who was a *Rosh Yeshiva*, head of a Talmudic academy, in Kurdistan. You just don't hear about these things. So we need to reach for each other, and stop using the language that divides us: "Non-Orthodox people do that." Or: "In progressive movements we do this."

And look at the language of change! Where do you find no change? Only in a museum. If anything's alive, it's changing. That's the definition of life. So then, let's accommodate the reality and acknowledge it and then deal with it.

**Sue Levi Elwell:** Here I would like to give a plug for the wonderful posters that came out of Ma'yan and the Jewish Women's Archive, which really were for all of us. I loved what Shifra [Bronznick] said earlier today: Give us good work to do and we can do it across all kinds of boundaries.

I spend my life going to synagogues, and across a pretty large area. And every time I walk into a synagogue and I see those posters up, my heart lifts. I'm hoping somebody is interpreting those posters for the people who walk by them.

But I really believe that Barbara Dobkin was right, that if you keep passing them day after day, someday you're going to lean against the wall and start reading it. Whether you're 10 or 15 or 55 or 70. We need to continue to create those kinds of resources that are about our history, that reclaim that history, make it visible before us, whether it's in books or videos or on the screen or online, or whatever.

**Norma Joseph:** And it's up to us to use them once they are there, to use them and to keep finding new venues and sources to develop that material.

**Sue Levi Elwell:** I plaster them when I take them to camp. And it's like, "Oh, here she comes again!" But it's a new group of kids, and it's a new group of counselors, who have to encounter Lillian Wahl and everybody else in those terrific posters.

**Danya Ruttenberg:** I agree that we absolutely should be sharing resources and collaborating and creating new projects. And in the meantime, we can't be afraid to use—everybody already has a

lot of wonderful material—and there's no reason why a Reform synagogue can't use things from the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance. And vice versa. We can't be afraid of denominational labels, if there's something of value.

**Norma Joseph:** Right, but we also can't hold back from, and we shouldn't be afraid of saying, "I don't agree with the way you are reading that text."

**Danya Ruttenberg:** Yes, absolutely.

**Norma Joseph:** And not be afraid they're going to say, "There's Norma, knee-jerk Orthodox Jew, uh-oh." But rather, say it and then discuss it and develop it. Allow ourselves to have different textual analyses and not say, "But that's not really feminist."

**Judith Hauptman:** JOFA is coming out with a feminist curriculum for grades three and four on biblical—not just women in the Bible—but how to read the Bible. And JOFA included me on their panel of people who develop it, but that is a secret because I think that will only hurt them then they go out . . .



**Audience Member #1:** I have great respect for everyone in this room who has worked so hard, for so long, on feminist issues. But I want to raise a wholly different perspective. The title of this conference is "Jewish Women Changing America." And what I heard throughout the conference, including last night, has been Jewish women changing Judaism. I think we're missing an enormous amount of Jews who are not as schooled as the people in this room are, or who live lives that are never accepted within the Jewish frame. For example, intermarried Jews. I don't hear anyone—I think it's really interesting that there is so much talk of so much change with women, and yet there are groups of women who live with people of other faiths, who have in-laws, for example, of other cultures.

Never, ever do I hear something like that expressed. Also, I don't know if any of you read Maureen Dowd's article in today's *New York Times Magazine*, on changing feminism. Or if you read the marriage announcements in the back of the *Times*. I think that the Jewish world has to open to a far-changing reality in our society of intercultural and cross-cultural dialogue.

I mean, if anything, what's happened is that feminism has given our young women more tools and more opportunities to interact in all levels of society. So I guess what I'm saying is that I

would love to get out of the hermetically sealed box that I have been experiencing the past couple of days, and just say, what about America? What about the Jews who do not see a vision of the future in what they have so far? New visions of what a twenty-first century Judaism can be, that include multiple perspectives and a rich analysis of the society in which we live. Not just our Jewish texts and our Jewish world.

Just one other thing. There is a group called the Center for Work/Life Policy that is looking at feminism and social change within corporations. And nobody mentions any of those things that are really working outside and doing successful work to bring women many more choices. I just think we miss something if we don't look out as well as in, and bring into the Jewish community more strands of dialogue.

**Sue Levi Elwell:** I work in the Reform movement. We have nearly 1000 synagogues across the country. The doors of those synagogues are open to the very people that you're speaking about. Whether they live in Palo Alto or Manhattan or in Tuscaloosa or in the Upper Peninsula in Michigan. And the work that we do in these synagogues is building community. Building community across difference. Not every single rabbi has had the benefit of studying with the amazing

feminist scholars who are teaching in our four campuses. But many of them have. And many of them are beginning to understand how feminist process can transform the work in a synagogue to truly create an egalitarian, mutually respectful, vibrant, and resilient community.

The doors of Reform synagogues are open. We continue the discussion about what that means in Reform Judaism. I truly believe that we're doing that. And also, our movement—and I only will speak for our movement—works hand-in-hand with our religious action center in Washington, day after day, looking at the issues that are facing all Americans. We're trying to have an ongoing dialogue with our representatives in Congress about making policy that truly reflects our views, and not just our views about how Jews should be in the world, but how we should treat one another. So I really urge you to go onto our website—[urj.org](http://urj.org) or [rac.org](http://rac.org), that's the Religious Action Center.

We try and maintain that very delicate balance between being present in the world and being present for ourselves. Because if we don't take care of ourselves, as Lori said, we end up being so exhausted, we can't even speak to one another. But if we don't take care of the world, who are we?

**Norma Joseph:** I just want to take issue with one assumption: "I think we should be open and we should be inclusive and we should cover every single topic that we should possibly cover in three minutes or less." At some point, you can't have a conference that addresses everybody's distinctiveness and needs.

We need to make conferences that are specific. I remember, I guess it was in the seventies, after a slew of having "The First Conference This" and "The First Conference That," somebody got up and said, "Can we please graduate to second grade and have the second?" We're a little beyond the second grade now, where we now can specialize, maybe, in some of our conferences. It doesn't mean we don't think other issues aren't prioritized and we don't work in other areas also, but we're addressing one part of it right now. That's one point I wanted to make.

The other point is that I don't think you can change America without first changing your own community. Changing Judaism is about making an impact, yes, on where I live, which is both being a Jew and an American, and even a Canadian.

**Audience Speaker #2:** I have a question specifically directed at Norma Joseph. I'm wondering, in your interpretation of halakah, Jewish law, what would feminist Orthodoxy look like in the

synagogue? I'm wondering if you can be very specific. Would women and men sit together? Would women be called up to the Torah, read the Torah, touch the Torah. Would there be women rabbis? When it's not Shabbat, would there be more women present for daily services, saying Kaddish? If you can be very specific and tell us what can be changed, in your interpretation of halakah, and what is immutable?

**Norma Joseph:** I'll be specific. It's a good question. But I'll begin by saying that I don't know yet, because I have not been the beneficiary of all the great halakah genius and resources feminist halakists can bring to the fore. In other words, what I can see is based on my limited reading of halakah right now, but I'm looking forward to a whole new generation of female halakists who will bring a gender theory and analysis, and change it even further. So that's my parameter.

But I am committed to the halakah process. I want it to be done through a halakah process. Not by saying, "We need to change this, let's change it." I want to change divorce law. I want to change it so badly, I can taste it. But I want it to be done through a halakic system that will actually free women, not because I want to be able to say that we've changed it.

So the synagogue right now that I can see—I happen to like separate seating. So I would like to have separate seating. Men and women equally, right down the middle. Women having *aliyot*. A female rabbi or female president or female *hazan*, cantor—I think those things are easily work-out-able. Halakically, I can see the precedence for it right now.

Women being called upon, not because they want to go to a daily minyan, but because it's obligatory. I'd like to change the nature of Jewish participation, which not all the movements have done, even those who are egalitarian and say that this is obligatory upon all Jews. Public prayer. If you pray publicly, you're counted in the minyan. I'd like to see a definitely changed liturgy.

**Audience Question #3:** I'm Naomi Scheman, Barnard Class of '68. I want to pick up on a number of themes that have been coming up and in some cases, not coming up. And pick up on what the woman back there was saying about the question of inclusiveness, which I think was not so much bringing everything in as opposed to having a particular focus for a conference.

But how appropriately to address the specific focus of this conference? And one spin that I would put on that is the connections between Jewish communities and other groups in

society that have both revealed something about the self-definition of Jewish communities, and changed those communities. The two major examples that I have in my mind are the relationships to the civil rights movement, and all of the wonderful and excruciating and painful aspects of that. And what Gina said as the stage hook was about to yank her off, which was the troubling alliances between not only Iranian but many American-born Jews and the radical Christian right. And I think that the elephant in the room that was sort of stomping its feet around is, of course, Israel. One problem is that once one names that elephant in the room, it's hard to talk about anything else. But it's also been a very conspicuous absence.

The other contribution of Jewish women to American life that I'd like to toss out—again, Norma, as you were ending your very, very interesting remarks at the beginning, you talked about the importance of non-Orthodox women not saying to Orthodox women who are not able to obtain a *get*, “Why don't you just leave?” And you said, if feminism is about anything, it's about choice. I think a major contribution that Jews have to make, not only to feminism but to American life in general, is to get over that. That notion of choice, for me, is so deeply Christian. And I think the *unchosen*, whether that means living one's life halakically, or—I'm an atheist and completely secular, so that's

not what does it for me. But what does it for me is—I was born a Jew, I have a responsibility to history, I have ethical obligations, for example: Do not make alliances with the radical right wing.

(laughter)

And I live in the Midwest now, where it's even worse to be judgmental than it is in some feminist circles here. But I'm judgmental. And I'm judgmental as a Jew. And I think that the mantra of choice has been problematic in reproductive rights. It's marginalized women of color and poor women. And the liberal individualist notion of choice is a deeply problematic one for all kinds of reasons. And I see Judaism and Jewishness as an enormous resource for trying to get us past that.

**Norma Joseph:** Well, I'm going to respond. I really liked what you had to say in many ways, both politically and theoretically. But I disagree with you about the word "choice." Just as I disagree about how people use the word "change."

I was born a Jew. Some of my friends might choose to accept Judaism, as though choice is part of their world, and I'm not going to deny them the choice. But once I understand the role—



and I am a halakic Jew, so I feel about obligations and responsibility—but I choose that. And I think it's intimately a Jewish notion, otherwise I wouldn't believe in Yom Kippur. In other words, I am held responsible because I've chosen to fulfill the law. I understand then that choice is my issue. Yes, I was born into this. Yes, I'm an Orthodox Jew. Yes, it's about obligation and about responsibility. But it's how I choose to enact those. It's still about choice for me. And I think that's one of the strengths of Judaism, not necessarily a Christian idea.

**Audience Speaker #4:** Thank you. My name is Anna Torres. I just came down from another college for the weekend. My question is about the subject of denominations. I'm seeing, in my own generation, especially among young men, a really strong polar fascination with Chabad-style, Lubavitch, Hasidic Judaisms.

And I'm wondering if you see this as some kind of backlash against this kind of gender confusion that they perceive that they want to escape? Or what part of that message is resonating so much with people my age? There is some real strong gender message being offered by the ultra-Orthodox, that's really appealing to people my age, even in the universities, where gender studies are the norm.

**Danya Ruttenberg:** That's a great question. A lot of people and particularly people who are probably in their late twenties now, for men particularly, have grown up with feminism as a given. And we've begun to see a generation or two where the expectations of different behavior is not just upon women. It's also upon men, not just to learn how to be P.C. and not make certain jokes in certain kind of company, but also, to have a change in behavior and share power. Some of it is age developmental, but I think there's a real comfort—absolutely, sometimes black and white is comforting and easy.

Other ways of engaging Judaism requires struggling and grappling and shades of gray and complexity. And having to make some really complex decisions about who I am, and then, where I fit into this picture. And probably, as the playing field has gotten more complex, in part because of the gender piece, going to a place where it's clearer what to do is probably very attractive. Also, I think it's worthwhile for all of us to look at what Chabad is doing, because I have some very major issues with the organization, but they are effective. They are offering things for free.

You can go, free *shabbis*, any time; you're welcome, just drop in. It's not judgmental about who you are, where you come from, what your observance level is: come, come, come, we're happy to have you. There is access. They are happy to help people learn.

I know quite a number of my friends and contemporaries originally got interested in Judaism because there was something that was free. It was a class issue. You're stuck in Jerusalem; there's no place to stay; there's Heritage House. So I think we need to figure out how to deal with giving people the tools to manage complexity, and also the ability to think for ourselves. It's difficult because funding issues are so major for so many of us. To think about how we structure our organizational life, to give people more access to what we've got, and to not have the only alternative to Chabad learning be at some fancy Center for Jewish Life where you have to pay 45 bucks just to get into.

**Judith Hauptman:** You know your generation a whole lot better than I do, but it seems to me there are a lot of young women, in addition to young men, who are attracted to the Chabad lifestyle, the ultra-Orthodox lifestyle. And it seems to me that it's not a question of gender confusion that they see among the rest of us; it's lack of passion. What I'm jealous of, what I give them tremendous credit for—the people to the right of me—is

their passion and their zeal. Now, passion and zeal can work in very, very negative kinds of ways. We read that in the newspaper every single day.

But this is passion and zeal harnessed to a grand vision. It's passion, zeal, and self-sacrifice. These various people go out to any community, all around the globe, and establish their institutions and search out Jews and try to make your Jewish life more meaningful to you. I don't know if I could have done that when I was their age. Yes, I think I have passion for what I do. But I would say, in general, what's lacking in many Jewish denominations is the kind of passion that you see with people who have a very clear sense of what is right. Who have a sense of a higher goal, who have a sense of mission and who have that kind of passion. I wouldn't take it away from them. My final statement is—and I think you just said it, Danya—that we too, meaning the rest of us, have to offer these kinds of opportunities.

I will self-congratulate this free, walk-in, High Holiday minyan that I founded last year. We have attracted 200 people or more to every single one of our services. I think you need a lot of points in order to attach to Judaism, and we've got to go out there and give people these different points of access.

**Lori Lefkowitz:** I think the last three comments are not unrelated to each other. The first, about the inclusion of non-Jews in our communities is, translated for me, an issue of the extent to which we need to operate out of optimism, rather than fear. And appreciate who we are, the contributions of non-Jews who live with us, who work with us.

The last thing you said, Naomi, is that for you, Judaism is a resource. Again, we've done a lot of work as feminists in being critical of traditions in order to improve them, without articulating with enough clarity how Judaism works for us, what we love about it, what's effective about it, how it makes life better.

And I think *rebbeism* is a threat and it has re-emerged and . . .

(applause)

. . . it hasn't just re-emerged in Chabad forms. There are so-called *rebbes* who, with great potential of backlash, are reinstating old hierarchies, who are including women in facile ways. I mean, it's an updated, revalorized Hasidic model. And again, the appeal is what you've all said, that it feels good.

It's optimistic. It gives people what they need. Judaism can do that. We just need to find ways to package it . . .

**Norma Joseph:** Well, when the Hasidic movement first began, the Orthodox community was violently opposed to this radical new reinterpretation of Judaism and Jewish lifestyles. Led by the Vilna Gaon, they became called the *Misnagdim*, those who oppose.

But of course, that's a very bad, you don't want to be titled "those who oppose." I guess we could be pro-life in that way. Names like pro-life and pro-choice, those things indicate an awful lot about who we are. Grabbing the right name and the right title is important.

One of the things that the Chabad movement grabbed, and they do it wonderfully, is that they are very proud to be Jews. Last night somebody spoke about them being proud on campus, "in-your-face Judaism." And it was in-your-face, proud-to-be-Jewishness, without touching Israel, which was politically dangerous and difficult for students on campus. Especially on campuses that are not New York City-based, to say, "I'm proud to be a Jew, even if I disagree with Israel or I support Israel." Either way, a lot of students didn't want to stand out and say, "Deal with that elephant in the room." They just wanted to

say, "I'm a proud Jew." And the Chabad led them into a way of saying be proud that you're Jewish. Be passionate about it, dance with it, have schnapps, get a little drunk, maybe a little too drunk.

(laughter)

But they were very proud, and that was a lesson to us. It should be like a clarion call about saying what feeds us as Jews. Also, one of the Chabad movement's great contributions is that they're not ambiguous. It's not about choice; it's about, "Follow me and I'll show you the way and you're guaranteed."

To them there's no chaos. We'll tell you what women are good for, what men are good for, what Jews are good for, what God is for us. It's clear. And that clarity, at a time where we are very torn by ambiguities and by the chaos that ambiguities lead to, it's very helpful.

But I would disagree with you in saying that they're nonjudgmental. They are extraordinarily judgmental. If I walk into their room, they close all doors. The total judgmental curtain drops. For me! For you? Forget it!

(laughter)

So, they're very judgmental. My last point about Chabad is one that bothers me very much. One of the things that they do very successfully—as they say, "Come and we'll have food." I don't know if you know that every Chabad synagogue is owned by the rabbi. No boards. No presidents. They own their own synagogues. How do they do this? How do they provide free food? Well, everybody gives them donations. I wish we all gave donations to Hillel, so Hillel could have free food for all our students on campus. Stop giving money to Chabad!

(applause)

**Judith Plaskow:** I think this ties in with what Shifra said this morning: We should donate where our own interests are concerned, and be sure that the things we're supporting are supporting our interests.

**Audience Speaker #5:** It was exciting to hear about the feminist ferment going on in academia. Teaching has been a female-dominated profession for a very long time. And I would venture to say that in our schools—our day schools, our supplementary schools—the women who are having the greatest impact on the next generation of Jews are not involved in this feminist ferment,



thinking through issues from a feminist perspective. They often haven't had the opportunity. And I would very much like to hear from you—it was exciting to hear that there's some curriculum, but curriculum only has an impact when it really gets to and reaches teachers and the way they teach.

So, in all of the institutions of higher Jewish learning that you represent, what kinds of things are being done and can be done to bring classroom teachers into this kind of dialogue? What does it take to raise feminist questions in the classroom, to bring new models of Jewish scholarship into teaching, so that the next generation of children begin to learn in new ways?

**Judith Plaskow:** I think you've just given us a very exciting common project. Really, in all seriousness.

**Norma Joseph:** I think it's very hard. When we have students, for example, at the academic level, at the university level, do we then turn them on to go back into the Jewish day schools? So they've gotten a degree in, let's say, women and religion. Do I then turn them around and say, "Go back and teach grade one?" Or not? Even on that simple level, aside from creating, across the denominational divide, a network to help teachers become

introduced to these ways of thinking and topics, but just at that level.

**Judith Plaskow:** Unfortunately, we are reaching the end of our time, and I wondered if we could end by giving each of you a moment to say something about the issue that you would most like to see addressed in the next five years?

**Lori Lefkowitz:** That's a hard question to just spring on us, but I guess I leave this session as if one of the most important things that we discover is that we are in cross-denominational conversation. That Jews don't affiliate; synagogues do, really.

And that this is a shared enterprise. And what feels powerful to me is the last point that was emphasized about what Judaism feeds us. As feminists, we need to articulate systematically what it is about Judaism that feeds us. And then, develop strategies for sharing the new work. How many years ago is it, Norma, since *Half the Kingdom*?

**Norma Joseph:** 1989.

**Lori Lefkowitz:** 1989. I still hear your voice talking about *Bat Yiphtaach*, a mourning ritual in the *Tanach*, where women gathered

to mourn their losses. What happened to that holiday? I'm ready to bring it back.

As we revitalize Rosh Hodesh, as JOFA has attached the issue of *aguna* to *Ta'anit Esther*, I think it's time to reanimate *Ta'anit Esther*. We want to create, on kolot.org, a syllabi sharing mechanism. We need to be organized. Sharing these things and taking the feminist Judaism that we create and making it normative Judaism by getting the word out. That's the agenda.

**Norma Joseph:** I would say, I have a particularist agenda. And in the next five years I want solutions to the *aguna* problem. But my general agenda, as an American Canadian Jewish feminist, is to reach across all our divides and begin to explore the richness of our heritage, in the sense of finding those opportunities to celebrate. Celebrating *Bat Yiftach*, the daughter of Jephtha who took her friends for four days out in the mountains, this became an annual celebration, and I'm for it. I'm signing up, just tell me where to go.

**Danya Ruttenberg:** If there's one thing I'd like to change, it's not concrete or particular, so much as a tone or environment in which so many of us are working. It came up quite a few times

this morning, talking about Jewish institutions and the attempt to create new leaders who come up into this hostile environment.

Change is still painfully slow and painfully painful. And I think we need to change working environments. Change the tones in which mentorship is brought forth, and we can have a greater sense of connection between more established leaders and those who are coming up into Jewish leadership. If we can have more of a sense of collaboration and connection, rather than—it's still a very fierce and hostile greater Jewish world out there. And many of the things I'd like to have happen will take place if we can move past the rhetoric of feminism and actually make the environments feel like they are actually conducive to feminist work.

**Judith Hauptman:** I want to change JTS so that women don't have to go to the other schools, such as the West Coast no-longer-affiliated-school, so that the women feel attracted to come to JTS.

**Danya Ruttenberg:** Hey, I'm affiliated. We are affiliated.

**Judith Hauptman:** Oh, okay. Well, we're no longer fund-raising together.

**Danya Ruttenberg:** See, but this is the thing. We are competing for dollars, instead of . . .

**Sue Levi Elwell:** What I want to change is to have more compassion for the difficulty of the path that we're all on. Greater compassion for one another, and I'm very moved, always, by having the opportunity to hear Norma speak. Even though the challenges we face are very different.

And to know—here we are completing just a short sentence, but what do we say when we complete a book that we're studying? We complete it with *hazak, hazak, v'nithazek*. To really go beyond—that may be trite for some of us, but it truly is about strengthening one another. We share this enterprise of creating a Judaism where we can all live full lives.

**Judith Plaskow:** So, *hazak, hazak, v'nithazek*. Thank you all.