Feminism and Heresy


The question of women and Judaism is more crucial than all the political problems of the people and its state. Failure to deal with it seriously threatens the viability of the Judaism of Torah and Mitzvot (commandments) in the contemporary world.

2. Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teachings of the Christian Church (1931)

... [T]he history of religious movements should be understood in the context of two contradictory phenomena: "compromise with the world and rejection of the world."

3. R. Herschel Schachter, "Ze'i lakh be-ikvei ha-zon" (1985)

The women's liberation movement has already succeeded in influencing some of the idolaters...and this influence has already been transferred from the idolatrous nations to our brothers-children of Israel the Conservatives, until they ruled to include women in a prayer quorum, honor them with being called to recite the blessing on the Torah, and to ordain them as rabbis...And due to our many sins the hand of the Conservatives has become dominant...[thus] if Orthodox women shall participate in such quorums (minyanim), it would appear to all as if they partially accept the counterfeit approach of the Conservatives...For any issue which unto itself may be deemed permissible, but has become a symbol of destruction of the [true] religion...such an activity is transformed into a forbidden one.


The motivation to allow women to get aliyot (bless the Torah during the public reading) is not because we don't have enough men to do the job. Some women are looking for empowerment. Receiving an aliyot which was traditionally viewed as an act of compromising on one's privacy, has been looked upon by the amei ha'aretz (simple ones) as an act of empowerment. Pusly individuals try to "grab the omud" (almemar) and "grab maf'ir" (added portion) whenever possible. This attitude is in outright violation of the entire principle of tsniut (modesty)...Why should we even consider giving someone an aliyot for the sake of empowering that individual if this attitude is totally contradictory to our whole outlook on life?...The Tzedukim (Sadducees) were apparently bothered with the fact that the Torah discriminated against women regarding the laws of yerusha (inheritance), and they attempted to 'rectify' this "injustice" somewhat. In later years the early Christians adopted several of the positions of the earlier Tzedukim. The Talmud records that the early Christians divided yerushmos (inheritances) equally between sons and daughters. Several centuries later, the Reform movement continued with this complaint against the tradition that the rabbis were discriminating unfairly against women by having them sit separately in the synagogue.

This complaint has developed historically to become the symbol of rebellion against our masorah. The fact that this symbolizes harisus hadas (destruction of the religion) causes it to become a prohibited activity.

5. R. Herschel Schachter, "Can Women Be Rabbis" (2004)⁵
A. Clearly the motivation to have a woman read the kesuba (marriage writ) is to make the following statement: the rabbis, or better yet - the G-d of the Jews, has been discriminating against women all these millennia, and has cheated them of their equals rights, and it’s high time that this injustice be straightened out! What a silly misunderstanding! Our G-d never intended to cheat women of their rights and privileges! Quite the contrary! He wanted to give women the ability to fulfill vehalchta bidrachav (to go in his ways) in a more complete way - without ever having to compromise their tznius (modesty).

B. According to the Torah law, a daughter will only inherit a parent where there were no sons. The Tzdukim (Sadducees) felt that this was unfair, but there was nothing they could do about this because this point is explicit in the chumash (Bamidbar [Pentateuch Numbers] 27:8). But the following case is not explicit: if someone dies leaving a daughter and they previously had a son who had predeceased the parent, and that son left a daughter, i.e., a granddaughter of the deceased. According to the halacha, the granddaughter receives the entire inheritance while the daughter gets nothing. The Tzdukim were famous for their dispute with the chachamim (Sages) in this instance, and they felt that the daughter should at least share along with the granddaughter (Talmud Bava Basra 115b). They preached that the rabbis were cheating that daughter, and that women should have equal rights to those of men! Years later, after the destruction of the Second Temple, the early Christians picked up some of the "shlik" of the Tzdukim...so too they felt that the rabbis had discriminated against women, so they preached (Talmud Shabbos 116b) that sons and daughters should always share an inheritance equally. They also did away with the women’s section in the synagogue and developed the notion that "the family that prays together stays together...History repeats itself. In recent years, the Reform and the Conservative movements have expressed this same complaint against the rabbis, or better put - against the G-d of the Jews: discrimination against women! Look what has become of the Tzdukim, the early Christians, the Reform, and the Conservatives...

These hypocritical, "righteous" rabbis, smug in their conviction that cultural synthesis was not only traditionally sanctioned, but also the only proper course to save Orthodoxy, were dubbed by Schlesinger Sadducees. This was a felicitous choice, pregnant with both the implication that the neo-Orthodox were on the surface "similar to the Pharisees," but actually a sect apart.

Rabbi Schachter’s piece is a wonderful contribution. There are tens of thousands of Orthodox Jews in the Modern Orthodox world (and certainly in the Haredi world) who view the tearing down of all barriers by YCT and Open Orthodoxy with horror. However, they regard a simple recitation of chadash assur min ha-

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Torah (that which is new is biblically forbidden) as an insufficient answer, but they are open to listening to a presentation of where guidelines need to be drawn, and by whom. Rabbi Schachter’s presentation ought to be a wonderful beginning. This will be more important in the long run than the existence or disappearance of partnership minyanim. It will not be enough to take Rabbi Schachter’s formulation and use it to rally the troops. The challenge will be to take it and build upon it, at least to those who do not reject the idea of contemporary rabbinic authority. Before this essay, making the case for limitation was an issue of each Rabbi for himself. Rabbi Schachter’s contribution could allow for a common platform upon which others can build and explain, if enough people react favorably and embrace it. It creates a simple (but not simplistic) image that can be shared by the entire community, excepting the outliers.


In the early centuries of the Church’s existence, the refusal to accept ...the incarnation produced a number of heresies... Just as the early heresies tried to find a way around the theological implications of the incarnation, today some feminist theologians are offended by the reality that God became incarnate as a human male.


... [F]eminism is perhaps best understood as only one particular battle in a conflict that has been going on for quite a long time. The real confrontation...is between the Christian orientation to the concrete self-giving of the wholly other God and a very different religious orientation that regards the very idea of divine concreteness...as inevitably oppressive to the human spirit... Christians and Jews agree...that the God of Abraham enters into contingent relations with human beings through concrete elections at particular times and particular places...The single important disagreement between Christians and Jews has to do, of course, with the material claim that Christians make concerning the role of Jesus of Nazareth...to be sure, quite a disagreement. But the agreement on the formal level means that orthodox Christianity and traditional Judaism fall under gender-feminist critique for much the same reasons and in much the same way. There is room for significant Christian-Jewish theological conversation here.


Orthodox, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Judaism all emphasize, each in its own way, practice over dogma, and even Reform Judaism, despite its repeated attempts to define itself in quasi dogmatic terms, basically appears to operate within the same framework.

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