

## Women and Judaism, Rosh HaShanah Talk, Congregation Beth Chai, 2001

When I was asked to speak on the topic of Women and Judaism, I couldn't have been more pleased. This is a topic very dear to my heart. It is a topic that I have thought about, researched and lived. Some of what I have to share may be very familiar to you and some of it may be surprising.

I would like to start with a personal story. When I was about nine years old, I loved going to services. We had a very warm rabbi who would invite all the children up to the bima to be blessed, much as we do here at Beth Chai. I especially loved the singing.

I also loved playing with dolls. So it was a completely natural event for me to line up my dolls on my bed and conduct services for them, which mostly consisted of a rousing version of Ein Keloheinu. The only problem with this scenario was that at that time, there were no women rabbis. This experience remained a complete fantasy, in fact buried in my subconscious until I began to consider entering rabbinic college in the late 1980's.

As Humanistic Jews we are rightfully proud that the first Humanistic rabbi to be ordained was in fact a woman. However, this only occurred in 1999. The Reform movement was the first to ordain women as rabbis; a fact that completely escaped my notice in 1970 the year I graduated high school.

I spent the 70's in Israel. We were aware of the great feminist awakening happening in the United States. I read an interesting book that traced feminine images of God among other revolutionary propositions. One year, several of my friends got together and did a small Passover seder. My friend Shiffy brought readings about the midwives, Shifra (the derivation of her name) and Puah and they have been in my seder ever since. At some point backing the United States, I came across a Women's Haggadah and incorporated elements from that into many community seders that I led.

My quest was always to somehow reconcile my deep and abiding love for Jewish tradition with my deep respect for women and our contribution to the evolving Jewish civilization. Much of what we have been taught and much of what we have experienced as Jewish women has unfortunately been contaminated by sexism, i.e. the proposition that men are superior to women, are deserving of more respect and power than women and do the most important jobs in the Jewish community.

When I did eventually decide to go to college and get a degree in philosophy and religion I took a course in the philosophy of feminism. Here I encountered Phyllis Trible's eye-opening work on the Adam and Eve story. This led me to the conviction that closely examining the primary text of

Judaism –the Torah could lead to some startling revelations. I had to throw out the notion of human progress as a straight upward line with our era as the best ever. The Torah turned out to be less sexist than portrayed in children’s Bible storybooks, than traditional sources such as the prayer book, and much less sexist than Christian feminists had led us to believe. In a subsequent course in the Hebrew Scriptures I undertook to research the topic of Women in the Tanach. I discovered that I was not alone.

I found feminist scholars of both genders reading and analyzing texts with an emphasis on discerning the position of women in ancient Israel. What they and I found was this. In the earliest texts of our people, the texts probably based on an oral tradition, the women are often strong, central and surprisingly independent. For example, in the view of our ancestor’s; having a direct relationship with God was considered of primary importance. Sarah is portrayed as having such a relationship. We find her laughing at God and talking with God. At one point, the character of God even tells Abraham to “do as she says”. Rebecca is also portrayed as having a direct relationship with God, “She went to inquire of the LORD, and the LORD answered her” ((GENESIS 25:22-23). She has her own testing ritual and proves worthy of becoming a matriarch of the Israelites. She also sets the standard for hospitality and kindness to animal – two important values. Rachel and Leah are shown as having the power to name their children – a sign recognized by anthropologists as indicating familial authority.

The other strand of our tradition that features strong, named independent women is what Biblical scholars call the “tribal league period”. This is the time before the divided kingdoms when the people were more agriculturally based. Both the oral history stories and the tribal league stories have identifiable voices in the Bible. We find that during the “tribal league period”, or in the tribal league voice, we have three female prophetesses, one of whom is also female Judge. Deborah, who not only settles disputes for the people but accompanies them to battle. Miriam is named as a prophetess and stands as a leader in her own right.

We had a prophetess that was well know to the people of that time but has been almost lost to us. Her name was Huldah (*has* anyone heard of Huldah? No, me neither) and she was a very effective prophetess indeed. When the people find a scroll in the temple they bring it to her to be deciphered. She answers with a typical Judaic answer, “repent and change your ways”. The King does and is saved. What is most interesting about this is that Huldah was a contemporary of Jeremiah and Zephaniah; so why did the people come to her? Perhaps, suggests, Atalyah Brenner, she “...may have been more respected than her colleagues during her lifetime”. There are

also accounts of leaders consulting with “wise women” and of several women helping to rebuild the temple walls.

One of the most interesting works I read was that of Swedish theologian, Inger Ljung, (*Silence or Suppression*). In this work Ljung sets herself the task, “to trace as many statements as possible about women in the Hebrew Scripture”. In the course of doing this she came upon an important discovery. “A striking fact is that the statements about “real” women practically disappear from II Kings and onward. Ljung posits that the ordinary women disappear from the text at this point due to the emphasis of the court centered writer on issues of “national, political or religious matters”. Whereas, during the tribal league period, “...full female participation was essential in the land based economy”. When the covenant switches to a king, there is only mention of queens and queen mothers. The life of the people still working the soil may not have changed at all, but the emphasis of the people *writing* has changed. As the monarchies became more central and the population became more urban, women’s full participation also may have diminished.

The priestly writer is also another writer that does not include women except to regulate her. It is in the priestly writings that fathers take on the naming of the infants, and where women disappear from the genealogies. As the priests take charge of the era after the Babylonian exile, they are struggling to keep the ethnicity and religion of the Israelites intact. One of their strategies is to differentiate as much as possible from the surrounding people’s. Since the surrounding people had female participation in religious ritual, they would exclude women from such participation. This put Israelite women of the priestly class in a difficult position. Because they are members of the priestly class, they do not farm land. And because they are women of the *Israelite* priestly class, they do not participate in religious ritual. These women have limited productive function. Perhaps this is why the priestly writer ends up unable to view women in an egalitarian manner. Although not perhaps intended as misogynist, the priestly regulations have the function of sending powerful negative messages about women down through the ages.

After the destruction of the Second temple, the rabbis inherit the mantle of the priests. Laboring under oppressive situations, often in diaspora, forbidden to own or work land and barred from many trades, the men retreat into the study of Torah. Many of them proclaim that the study of Torah is the most important thing a Jew can do. However, without birth control or formula, most women are involved with childbearing and childrearing for their lifetimes. Any woman who has tried to snatch a few

moments to read while nursing a baby can instantly see how the study of Torah would be practically impossible for most women. Did this therefore mean that women were wholly second-class citizens in the Jewish world? There are several facts that contradict this. The first is the rabbis' insistence on matrilineal descent. This seems to indicate a deep respect for the important role women played in maintaining and contributing to the Jewish people, tradition and culture.

The second is more circumstantial. First of all, Sephardic women began to write and be published. Deborah Ascarelli, writing in sixteenth century Italy was the first woman to have her prayers included in an official prayer book. She was followed by Rachel Morpogo, Alice Lucas, Grace Aguilar and Fanny Neuda. My personal favorite is Emma Lazarus, author of the poem inscribed at the base of the statue of Liberty. While admittedly a minority, these women did exist. Prayers written by and for women, called *tichenes* began to show up in Ashkenazi circles.

A quick review of the history of Jewish immigration to America, shows us so many strong Jewish women leaders that I suggest that somewhere, somehow, Jewish homes allowed or encouraged Jewish women to retain their voice in significantly different ways from many of the surrounding cultures. The women involved in various humanist traditions of Eastern Europe such as Yiddishist and socialist continued to retain a vision of changing the world, commitment to justice and an identification with the oppressed that went beyond just an experience of their own oppression as women within Judaism. Part of the reason that the names of: Clara Lemlich, Rose Schneiterman, Lillian Wald, Emma Goldman, and Bessie Abromowitz are relatively unknown to us is due in part to the sexism of our own era. It may be no coincidence that the first elected female head of state was Golda Meir.

In the most recent awakening of feminism, the roster of early leaders in overwhelmingly Jewish. Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinam, Bella Abzug, Adrienne Rich all come out of the Jewish tradition. I would propose that it is an interesting mix of both the existence of sexism and some nurturing of thinking and speaking that allowed so many of these women to speak up and lead.

While it is incredibly wonderful that women can now be ordained as rabbis in all the Jewish movements except Orthodox, and it is a huge honor for me to be up here speaking; it would also be a huge mistake to think that this is *more* important than the incredible contribution women have made to Judaism in the home. I have maintained for years that matzah ball soup has kept as many people connected to Judaism as the study of Torah. (By

“matzah ball soup” I really mean the full range of culinary, symbolic and cultural contributions women have made from the home.)

Culture truly does consist of the rituals, ways of seeing the world and ways of being in the world that make up our daily lives. It is another form of sexism to denigrate women’s contributions from the home. It can be a form of internalized sexism that women themselves often see this work as less valuable. I believe that my mother’s creation of a “home-based Judaism” similar to that described by Letty Cotton Pogrebin gave me an example of the important place women can occupy in Judaism even without being rabbis. Her work as a Jewish educator, needless to say gave me another example. It is, however, a sign of change that I have been asked to speak here today, while my mother, although also a director of Jewish education was never asked to speak publicly.

These inspiring changes of including women in the public sphere of Judaism need to have their parallel expression in the inclusion of men in the private sphere of Judaism. Indeed, one of the most inspiring changes to take place in the modern era, to the extent that it has taken place, *is* the entrance of men into the nurturing world of cooking, cleaning and childcare. When both women and men can study Torah and make mazah ball soup, we will have found the rightful place for both women and men in Judaism. Close with Judy Chicago poem? Or not?