



*Photo: Susan Florian*

# JUDAISM'S VIEW OF WOMEN

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*L'auteure, rabbin du Temple Holy Blossom de Toronto, examine la position du judaïsme à l'égard des femmes et note que le monde juif est partagé sur le sujet. Les femmes juives s'identifient de plus en plus comme féministes; le féminisme ne peut donc plus être considéré comme un fait purement séculier.*

*Traditionnellement, les différences biologiques des sexes étaient à la base de la distinction sociale. Le domaine des femmes était la maison, celui des hommes, la synagogue. Cette position est aujourd'hui disputée.*

*L'auteure exprime ensuite ses inquiétudes sur trois sujets: les images de Dieu, les femmes en tant que créatures spirituelles, et les femmes en tant que chefs spirituels. Elle remarque que le Dieu nourricier et protecteur a appartenu à la tradition juive, mais en général n'a pas été vu comme "féminin"; que, bien que le judaïsme n'ait jamais nié la spiritualité des femmes, il ne s'en est pas préoccupé jusqu'à présent; et, puisque le rabbinat n'est pas fondé sur la notion d'intermédiaire mâle, il ne peut y avoir de fondement biblique à la théorie s'opposant aux femmes rabbins. L'image d'une femme rabbin choque encore, mais les réactions changent.*

It is as difficult to label Judaism's view of women as it is to label the secular world's view: it is full of paradoxes and confusions; hypo-

theticals, theories, and plain realities. What becomes even more difficult is finding *one* view, for the Jewish world is well split over this issue. One used to be able to succinctly categorize into the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform views; today however, the lines between these movements have become significantly blurred, especially between the latter two. What is even more relevant is that Jewish women who were for years feminists in the secular world have begun rallying in the Jewish world. No matter how hard traditional Jews try, they can no longer identify feminism as a purely secular movement. Jewish women are increasingly identifying themselves as *Jewish* feminists and questioning religious issues such as the role of women in prayer (women cannot be part of the ten needed for an Orthodox prayer forum, for example), the masculine imagery of God (embedded in the original Hebrew), and the ordination of women as rabbis in other movements beside Reform (they can be ordained in the Reconstructionist movement, an out-growth of Conservative Judaism, but women are still fighting to be ordained as Conservative rabbis).

In the traditional Jewish world view, biological differences between the sexes are the basis of social distinction. Women are exempt from fulfilling any commandment that is time-bound — in other words, any command whose per-

formance is inherently tied to a specific time, such as the putting on of phylacteries (*tefillin*) in the morning. (There are some glaring exceptions to this rule, such as the lighting of Sabbath candles, a time-bound command *incumbent* upon women.) The reason given is that they are fulfilling a more important command all the time — rearing and raising children — and one may not interrupt the performance of one command to fulfil yet another. The assumption that all Jewish women will marry and raise children is not only an Orthodox one, but it is used by Orthodox apologists to sustain a system of the synagogue as the rightful domain of men and the home as the rightful domain of women. This dual view is seen as biologically consistent and divinely sanctioned.

It is not only in the realm of Jewish law that feminists have begun to challenge the status quo. Biblical interpretation and biblical study are matters of interest for Jewish women. But in my view the most weighty and significant — and perhaps most interesting — new area of concern for Jewish women has become theology in general and women's spirituality in particular. I should like to address myself to three concerns in this realm.

## IMAGES OF GOD

In a lecture at the Hebrew Union College, Rita Gross noted that all religions suffer from what she calls

an androcentric view of the world: what is seen as male (strength, assertiveness, power) is valued and seen as the norm of society. Everything else is somehow a deviation or an "other." Theology has also been a party to this outlook, and God has been described almost exclusively in male terms: Father, King, Shepherd; God as strength, power, even warrior. Since language symbolizes the way we think, these terms point to a deeper issue. They are not merely words, as some would claim, but indicators of our images of divinity. God as Nurturer and Protector has been a part of the Jewish tradition through the ages, but those traits have not been described as "feminine" aspects of God, except in three small Kabbalist (mystic) circles. (The early Kabbalists described the *Shechinah*, God's mystical presence, as God's feminine side; Jewish feminists are today rediscovering this aspect in the *Shechinah*.) For Jewish women today, a masculinist view of God is neither helpful nor inspiring. Though the personification of Israel as God's feminine partner has been suggested, the concept is not nearly as satisfying as a more holistic approach to God, since Israel is still the passive partner and is never the object of our worship. In other words, Israel is the adorer and not the adored and therefore is yet another extension of the masculinist, dual view of active/passive. Whereas a feminine Israel leaves us once again in the passive state of being "an object of the beloved," a more complete (masculine/feminine) view of God gives us an active role as an *integral part* of the beloved.

## WOMEN AS SPIRITUAL CREATURES

In Judaism, the polemic of woman as "whore/virgin" is very rare indeed. Although there are a few examples of woman as temptress in the Midrash, these are not seen as mainstream views. The more compelling question is the ambivalence expressed by Talmudic

rabbis toward women and their share in Torah study. Since Torah study was seen as the highest spiritual endeavour of a Jew, to be denied access to that study was to be denied access to spiritual fulfilment. As was mentioned before, the synagogue was seen as the domain of men. With that went the House of Study, the Talmudic academies, and other forms of public Jewish leadership. Spiritual endeavours for women were then private affairs or were shared mostly in the company of other women. We have evidence that women composed their own prayers for special "women's occasions" such as the onset of menstruation or lactation and used their own prayerbooks with Yiddish commentaries. (These prayers are now being collected by Nina Beth Cardin of the Jewish Women's Resource Centre in New York.) In the last two centuries, these were the seeds of a spiritual search that took place in women's galleries in the synagogue or at home. It is flowering today in the *public* Jewish community for the first time. Though Judaism has never denied women's spirituality, the concept has not until now become a concern.

## WOMEN IN SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP: THE RABBINATE

Judaism has no male intermediary upon whom our rabbinate is based. In this way, perhaps, we are fortunate in that there can be no biblical basis against women in the rabbinate. There are some legal difficulties, such as the problem of women rabbis as witnesses in the signing of a *Ketubah* (Jewish marriage certificate) or as part of a *beit din* (three rabbis needed for legal decisions), but by far these problems, when put into perspective, are not at the core of what stands in the way of the ordination of women in Conservative or even Orthodox Judaism. The root problem is purely psychological and sociological: the rabbinate has for centuries been like the synagogue, a public male domain. When most Jews close their eyes and conjure

up the image of "rabbi," they see an old man with a long beard, learned in Torah and Talmud, and not completely involved in the secular world. Reform and Conservative rabbis have changed that expectation somewhat, so that a more contemporary concept might be a young man with a keen interest in Torah and Talmud and a sharp eye for secular reality. The image of *woman* as rabbi is still new and shocking; it will be so for another ten years. Though women are fast becoming authority figures in the business sector, many people still feel the need to undermine the authority of women clergy by comments on their appearance, age, marital status, or by making inappropriate sexual remarks.

But there is evidence to suggest that the layperson's reaction to the woman rabbi is, at least in Reform circles, becoming more and more positive and even uplifting. A new role model is being provided for Jewish women, a model of public leadership and scholarship, of Jewish learning and worldly confidence, which is inspiring to women who for so long have had only men to emulate. With this is the added dimension of a woman's view of the Bible and sacred texts, where for so long we have heard only male voices and commentaries. Furthermore, the existence of women in the rabbinate is bound to change the entire rabbinate itself, to bring to it a spirit and vitality that any organization enjoys when it has both male and female active participation.

Some people fear "the feminization of Judaism" and the rabbinate in particular. I have no fear of that: only enthusiasm and anticipation of the day when all women will reach out to take their rightful share in the inheritance of our patriarch and matriarchs.

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