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Does Judaism discriminate against women?

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There is a deep conflict between Judaism and feminism which puts many Jewish women under intense pressure. Grassroots reform is needed

I grew up during the second wave of the feminist movement, yet my consciousness was not raised until I reached university in the late 1970s. At that time, there was a strong feeling emerging that a revolution was in place where "institutionalised prejudice" in all its forms would finally be swept away.

There is however, a deep conflict between Judaism and feminism which stretches from the public (in synagogue) to the private. For example, in all Orthodox synagogues men pray separately from women and in many women are relegated to an upstairs gallery. Gender hierarchies are entrenched in Jewish thought: a blessing orthodox Jewish men are required to say everyday thanks a God "who has not made me a woman".

This tension has been a make or break one for many Jewish people who have left Orthodox Judaism for conservative versions (in some cases just leaving the whole thing behind), Professor Alice Shalvi being a distinguished example.

There are many couples where the husband is involved and the woman is estranged. What drives this is the dissonance between women's lives in society at large where, at least in principle, all options are open to them, and their role in traditional Jewish life which is limited and constrained by laws developed by (male) rabbis.

These laws, which do include some progressive aspects (described by conservative Rabbi Judith Hauptman as a "benevolent patriarchy"), have wide implications for women's lives. Yet as feminism has progressed, attitudes towards the role of women in orthodox Judaism have lagged behind.

A clear example is the case of "chained" women whose husbands refuse them a religious divorce and who cannot remarry. This is a serious problem which could be solved in halakha, however this has not happened. Instead, secular law has been asked for help to ensure that civil and religious divorce are kept in step through pre-nuptial agreements, raising significant debate as to how systems such as halakha and Sharia law interact with the laws of the state.

Despite rabbinic inertia, there is tremendous pressure from the grassroots and it may well take the introduction of Orthodox women rabbis to create a new dynamic. To become a rabbi one has to achieve a given level of knowledge of Jewish law. Whilst the Talmud says that teaching one's daughter Torah is "frivolity", it has long been recognised by some authorities that this does not apply when women have the interest and aptitude. (It may well be frivolous to Torah in depth to men who have no great interest, yet Judaism sees this study as a mitzvah.)

This is now beginning to happen. One of the first examples is Rabbi Dr Haviva Ner-David who calls herself a "post-denominational" rabbi as she has struggled to gain acceptance. There has been an important recent development in the US driven by the leadership of Rabbi Avi Weiss's "open Orthodoxy". Weiss has announced the opening of a new academy to train women rabbis, who are controversially given the title "MaHaRaT" rather than rabbi. To date this initiative has been accepted by other Orthodox groups.

The hope is that such radical steps can heal schisms rather than creating further ones. These issues do generate heated controversy even in non-Orthodox circles – one "conservative" synagogue in London split due to a bitter row over whether women can wear prayer shawls normally worn by men.

Orthodox Judaism does see essential differences between men and women, but much more needs to be done to help Jewish women deal with the impossible tensions between wider society and Orthodoxy. The separation of gender roles doesn't prevent an accommodation with "third wave" choice-based feminism, but this will involve a re-reading of the rabbis in our modern context but also within the context of tradition.

As a male member of the grassroots, I want to see this process develop. Blu Greenberg, who founded the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, famously wrote "where there is a rabbinic will there is a halakhic way" and we need to make clear that change is necessary. In the UK, the Orthodox United Synagogue is involving women in lay leadership. However, this is just a start. The United Synagogue is presenting a 10 year update of its "Womens Review" later this month. I'd be amazed if it recommended the introduction of Orthodox women rabbis, but this is a necessary development which grassroots pressure will eventually create.