

Introduction to Critical Feminist Studies

November 14, 2008

Orthodox Judaism: A Place for Feminism?

When a professor or student presents feminism in a class, it is almost always presented as a single, monolithic movement and philosophy. This is a misleading assumption. Along with the many different definitions of feminism, looking through the lens of white American culture (as most classes are initially presented), we do not account for other cultures or sub-cultures within the country or the world. Our culture significantly shapes the ideas we form about the world around us. If the community around us is different, then of course we will get different ideas.

One sub-culture in America of great interest for feminist studies is the Jewish community, particularly the Jewish Orthodox community because of its strict gender roles and rituals. The standard first, second, and third wave feminism categories don't fit this religious community. On the surface, Orthodox Judaism seems to completely devalue women. According to an essay by Judith Plaskow, women "have been excluded from much of Jewish religious life," from the circumcision ritual to the bar mitzvah (Plaskow 180). The bat mitzvah (bar mitzvah equivalent for girls) is a relatively recent (compared to the age of Judaism) addition; the first public bat mitzvah in the United States was in 1922 (Wikipedia B'Nai Mitzvah). Orthodox men recite a prayer everyday that (translated from Hebrew) includes the blessing ". . . who has not made me a woman" (Reifman). In synagogue, women must sit in the back in an area usually designated as "behind the men," not specifically as the "women's section" (Cohen). The Torah is traditionally passed around the men's section for blessing, and has only recently been passed to the women as well.

Is it possible to have feminism in a religious community that promotes ideas of inequality? Yes, perhaps with some customs to create a balance, and with acknowledgement that generally people are not forced into or fully bound into a religion. Oppression of women in an entire society is more significant than oppression within a sub-culture because women in the Orthodox community still interact with people outside of it. Therefore, they have exposure to non-Orthodox traditions and cultures. Alongside those customs that put women in the subordinate position in the religious culture, Orthodox Judaism has some practices that stand out as cherishing and respecting women's power.

There is one important gender-specific practice that could be interpreted as very controversial in the feminist community outside of the Orthodox community. Once married, husbands and wives follow a special schedule for intercourse and affectionate touching based on a woman's menstrual cycle. The *niddah* status occurs when a woman bleeds from her uterus (menstrual cycle). While in the *niddah* status, a woman is not permitted to have affectionate contact or intercourse with her husband. This status lasts a minimum of 12 days, including 7 days without any bleeding from the uterus, after which a woman must go through a ritual purification (*mikveh* water immersion) to be considered in the *tehorah* status, during which physical relations are permitted.¹ *Niddah* status is very strictly observed. The *niddah* status applies even to women who are in labor, so a man is not allowed to touch his wife at all—even hold her hand—once she has any bleeding from her uterus, even if it is from giving birth to his child. Couples also have to be careful when doing everyday tasks such as passing a baby from one parent to the other.

¹ There are very specific procedures to ensure a woman is no longer bleeding. See <http://www.yoatzot.org/topic.php?id=39> for very detailed questions and answers.

According to one source, husband and wife are not even allowed to eat or drink from the same cup or bowl while observing *niddah*.²

From this practice, it can be interpreted that a woman is treated as dirty when she is menstruating. Forcing a woman to take so much care to investigate when she is “clean” brings a shame or disapproval of a woman being *niddah*. However, in the modern Orthodox community this “family purity” observance is to help keep the couple close. Abstinence is not mandated because of a husband’s possible repulsion for his menstruating wife. Yes, impurity is declared, but it simply means certain precautions are taken to avoid temptation. A husband is discouraged from undressing in front of his wife while she is *niddah*, and a wife practices modesty as well. Female sexuality is not disregarded. When a woman is *tehorah*, her desires are as important as her husband’s. Both the husband and wife handle the difficulty of periodic abstinence, and Orthodox Judaism acknowledges this.

The ritual of prohibiting sex and then encouraging is supposed to help a couple bond physically and non-physically. Periods of forced abstinence make a couple bond non-sexually. One website encourages couples to set aside time during a woman’s *niddah* status to have meaningful conversation so the partners stay connected.³ If we want what we cannot have, then time physically apart should help bring a husband and wife close together.

This practice could also be viewed as a transfer of power to the wife. It is up to her to check for any spotting, and to consult a rabbi if she has any question. The woman also bears responsibility for thoroughly preparing herself for immersion in the mikveh, a specially

² <http://www.yoatzot.org/question.php?id=4530>

³ <http://www.yoatzot.org/topic.php?id=85>

maintained community water bath.⁴ Only when the woman follows this ritual is the couple permitted to touch again. It would be against the rules for marriage, but theoretically a woman could deny her husband sex by avoiding the mikveh if she wanted to.

Besides carrying the responsibility for ensuring *niddah* or *tehorah* status, Jewish Orthodox rules also make the woman an equal partner in a marriage in some respects. A divorce requires the consent of both the husband and the wife, ensuring equal say from both people. Customs also require that the man and woman to meet at least once before marrying, and if one finds the other unattractive, the marriage is not allowed (Judaism 101). According to one source, women have a lot of power regarding sex in the marriage, and it is considered “the woman's right, not the man's,” (called “*onah*”), and the husband is required to pleasure his wife. Failure to do so is a legitimate reason for divorce. Women don't have complete control though, and a man can divorce his wife if she refuses to have sex with him (Judaism 101)

With the different (second class in the synagogue, equal partner in the home) positions women seem to hold in Orthodox Judaism, what does feminism in this community look like? Following the principle that there is no one universal feminism everyone can unite under (one size does *not* fit all), surely we can find feminism even in a culture that (from an American point of view) oppresses women. Scholars and writers have looked at the compatibility of Orthodox Judaism and modern “western”¹ feminism. Tamar Ross wrote a book about how feminism “challenges...the underlying philosophy of *halakhah*⁵ as conceived by Modern Orthodox jurists” (Reifman). With strict gender roles in worship and at home, we can clearly see how feminism and Orthodox Judaism conflict.

⁴ Preparation includes detangling hair, brushing teeth, cleaning fingernails, and showering/bathing before mikveh immersion

⁵ *halakhah* is “Jewish law”

According to Tamar Ross, “Orthodox feminists have very considerable social and emotional stakes in maintaining the sexual status quo, and they do so recognizing that their Jewish identity is a package deal” (Ross 220). Orthodox women who want to change their gender roles may find feminism their key to equality. The feminist movement within the Jewish Orthodox community has largely focused on allowing women to be educated as men are in the Torah (Jewish holy text). So far the movement growth has been slow and it faces resistance. Brandeis University sociologist Sylvia Barack Fishman writes, “Even for many who identify as modern Orthodox, feminism is thought to be code for ‘angry women’” (Cohen). Like the rest of the country, feminism becomes a stigmatized word, a label that many people (men and women) don’t want to apply to themselves. Fishman gave the example of how only half of the women attending a conference on the Jewish Orthodox faith and feminism called themselves feminists. Perhaps these women who chose to avoid the feminism label were doing so because they did not agree with liberal “western”⁶ feminism and instead were looking for a new movement that would allow them equality while still respecting the lifestyle they require as part of their faith.

ⁱ In class, when we talk about feminism we do not give it a cultural tag because we assume we are talking about a sort of universal feminism. Really we are talking feminism from our culture, which I will call “western”

⁶ While the Orthodox Jewish community I refer to in this paper is in the United States, members still lead different lives than that of a typical American