

Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

Gender



Context

One of the distinctive features of Reform Judaism is our unequivocal commitment to gender equality. Or is it? As Rabbi Barbara Borts of Darlington Hebrew Congregation writes, though there are many examples of equality in our movement (such as our exceptional siddur and women in senior rabbinic positions) the journey towards true equality in our communities has been a process of development over many years, and in some ways is not yet complete.

Content

The male rabbi who was approached to write this section demurred, believing it was inappropriate for him to write about gender issues. Gender, he believed, really meant ‘women.’ This is a natural conclusion. After all, Judaism developed as a patriarchal religion with strict delineations between male Jewish life and female Jewish life: male Judaism was the norm [a Jew and His Judaism] and the woman, a separate category.ⁱ Although the idea of gender now encompasses many aspects of sexual identity, for most people, ‘gender’ will mean ‘women’ and we will thus examine past and current thinking about women’s roles in the MRJ.

In 1840 West London Synagogue, women’s equality was not part of the founders’ visions. Women sat in the balcony until 1910 (except for the Yamim Nora’im) and the choir was initially all-male, although women would join early on.ⁱⁱ Other founding synagogues discussed participation by women, but there was no consensus about what equality for women entailed, not even through the 1990s and perhaps beyond. The first women rabbis often encountered great opposition and found it difficult to gain employment against male candidates for particular jobs. People left Reform synagogues when women rabbis were engaged. In the early 1980s, one synagogue engaged in contentious debate regarding the appointment of a female warden, whilst down the road, a young woman was told by a male rabbi that her Bat Mitzvah was the first and last time she would participate in the Torah service. Many parents gave their daughters, but not their sons, the choice to celebrate a Bat Mitzvah. There were outcries against women wearing *tallitot* and women often were barred from even attempting *hagbahah*. When the last *siddur* was compiled, study passages relating to women extolled their roles as wives and mothers.

In the 1991 book *Faith and Practice in Reform Judaism*ⁱⁱⁱ, by Rabbi Jonathan Romain, there is not a separate chapter on women, although ‘women’ as a subject appear intermingled throughout the various sections. Women-as-mothers is covered, and men’s role in the family is touched upon, but not in an egalitarian sense, in that Romain writes that mothers can stay at home or work, whereas men can choose to take an active role. He writes that women are regarded as the religious equals of men^{iv} and are equal in matters of status,^v then touches upon women’s involvement in ritual life by noting that there are a small but growing number of women who wear a *tallit* and that *tallitot* now appear in different colours.^{vi} Lastly, there is a mention about the beginnings of non-gender specific language in the *siddur*: “British Reform Jewry in its radicalism... is catering for female congregants through the introduction of inclusive language in the prayerbook.^{vii} This is seen as a concession to women, and not as something that would enhance religious life for all.

Yes, things have changed. Today, women are senior rabbis in pulpits that once would not hire women. Most synagogues have women wardens, and women serving in all capacities of leadership. Non-gender specific, inclusive language is enshrined in our newer liturgies, and men as well as women find it liberating. Women perform every mitzvah available in many synagogues. And study passages in *siddurim* reflect this wider perspective.

That is not to say all hesitations are now resolved. There are still a few Reform synagogues that would not consider engaging a female rabbi, and there are rabbis and lay readers, both male and female, who continue to use gendered language, even changing language back to its previous male orientation. Male language in the liturgy still predominates, particularly in the Hebrew. This is a wider problem in a language that only has two genders, but a commitment to shattering stereotypes of all kinds might suggest that creativity can be brought to bear on this as well if it were to rate more highly as a priority.

As this section is called ‘gender,’ it is important to note that there are some issues concerning men. For one, although women now commonly recite Kiddush, a ‘male’ *mitzvah*, we rarely find men lighting Shabbat and festival candles. This illustrates the contention that there are still deeply held feelings about roles within Judaism, a perception which is strengthened by the observation that most Reform Jewish women do not wear a *tallit*, that in some communities the Honorary Secretary of the synagogue must be a woman, that some older women still refuse certain *mitzvot*, and that, in common with a general backlash against feminist ideas, there are even female rabbis who dismiss feminist perspectives and further discussion about complete inclusivity.

As the Jewish public arena is often seen as a male space, concern is being expressed at what many feel is a decrease in male attendance at services, at Leo Baeck College, and within lay leadership. The view had been expressed that Reform Judaism is becoming ‘feminized’ in ways that make it less attractive to men, which indicates that there is still, or even heightened, discomfort about women’s active and visible participation in Jewish life, their voices,^{viii} and the attention paid to inclusive language and concepts.

There is an intersection here between views about gender roles in the wider world, and traditional views which derive from Jewish life. Reform has never placed itself at the radical edge of Jewish movements, and its members may feel content with the numerous very positive changes that there have been, in participation, opportunities, acceptance, and ritual and liturgical modification. But gender differentiation as essentialist is deeply embedded in many members and this will set limits on what changes might occur in the near future. Many of the sociological ‘battles’ have been won, but few yet of the theological.^{ix} Perhaps the next book on Reform beliefs and practises will paint yet another picture – by omitting the topic of gender altogether.

Contemplation

We are rightly proud of the steps that we have taken towards gender equality in our movement. How, though, do we reflect on the more difficult aspects of the past years, and honour those who have striven to affect this change? How, too, do we name and address our current inequalities, which vary from synagogue to synagogue, but which we must all be honest enough to acknowledge still exist?

ⁱ In the Talmud, one tractate is called *Nashim*, women. There is no comparable separate section entitled *Anashim*, men [and the word ‘anashim’ also conveys the meaning of ‘people,’ another interesting way to understand rabbinical views about women’s Otherness]. Men are the subjects of virtually everything in rabbinical Judaism and women are a topic to be studied in their alterity.

ⁱⁱ From the letters of Charles Verrinder. Movement archives held at Southampton University.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jonathan Romain, *Faith and Practice*, London: Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, 1991

^{iv} *Ibid*, 4

^v *Ibid*, 89

^{vi} Perhaps obliquely implying that the tallit is, for women, a fashion accessory as well as ritual garment.

^{vii} I have witnessed the whole of this transition. I wrote a letter to Rabbis Magonet and Blue concerning various levels of change that could be made on feminist grounds to the 1977 Forms of Prayer. I was the first rabbi to create an egalitarian Reform siddur, for the *shalosh regalim* or Pilgrim Festivals. The battle for its use, even as an experiment, was extremely heated and protracted. In the end, permission was given to use it for a period of three years and when the then RSGB published its own non-gender specific *machzor*, some people in the synagogue were proud that they had been pioneers.

^{viii} This arose in my ethnographic research about music in the MRJ – some men felt that the gentler singing of women, and the preponderance of music by, among others, Debbie Friedman, detracted from their ability to participate whole-heartedly in services.

^{ix} This refers to a famous debate between two leading Jewish feminists, published in Heschel, Susannah, ed, *On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader* [New York: Schocken Books, 1983] about what needs to change in Judaism to further equality.. Cynthia Ozick maintained, in her article “Notes toward Finding the Right Question,” p120, that the status of Jewish woman needs to change on the principle of justice and thus, it is a sociological shift that is needed, increasing opportunities for women to participate fully in Jewish life. Judith Plaskow disagreed and in her article “The Right Question is Theological,” she feels that feminism as a matter of “civil rights” [p223] will not transform Judaism.