Women & Orthodoxy
A Call To Discussion

The Women & Orthodoxy
Task Force
of
The Orthodox Caucus
www.womenandorthodoxy.org

THE ORTHODOX CAUCUS
WE FACE UP
TO TOUGH ISSUES
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Drs. Giti Bendheim and Joel B. Wolowelsky were Co-Editors of this Project.
Respondent Biographical Information

Rabbi Kenneth Auman is the rabbi of the Young Israel of Flatbush in Brooklyn, NY.

Dr. Giti Bendheim is a psychologist and co-chairperson of the Women & Orthodoxy Task Force.

Pearl Berger is the Benjamin Gottesman Librarian / Dean of Libraries at Yeshiva University.

Rabbi Hershel Biller is the rabbi of the Young Israel of Woodmere, in Woodmere, NY.

Rookie Biller is the assistant principal of the SKA High School for Girls in Hewlett, NY.

Judith R. Feder practices law in New York City and is co-chairperson of the Women & Orthodoxy Task Force.

Miriam Goldberg lives in Riverdale and Atlantic Beach, NY.

Rina Kurz Goldberg is a vice president of Neotaxis Technologies.

Rabbi Shmuel Goldin is the rabbi of Congregation Ahavath Torah in Englewood, NJ.

Tobie Brandriis Goodman teaches biology at Hunter College High School in New York City.

Rabbi Jeffrey Kobern teaches at the Ramaz School in New York City.

Michelle Greenberg-Kobern practices law.

Debby Koren, Ph.d., is the director of Internet Technologies at RAD Data in Tel Aviv, Israel.

Esther Krauss is the principal of Ma'ayanot High School for Girls in Teaneck, NJ.

Abby Lerner teaches at Yeshiva University High School for Girls in New York.

Rabbi Haskel Lookstein is the rabbi of Kehilath Jeshurun and principal of The Ramaz School in New York City.

Pearl Markowitz is an English and Holocaust Studies teacher at John Bowne High School in Queens, NY.

Matthew J. Maryles is a member of the Executive Committee of The Orthodox Caucus.

Chaya Batya Neugroch teaches at Ma'ayanot High School for Girls in Teaneck, NJ.

Rabbi Benjamin J. Samuels is the rabbi of Congregation Shaarei Tefilla in Newton, MA.

Jordana Schoor teaches Judaic studies.

Rabbi Abraham Wahrhaftig is the director of Camp Morasha in Lake Como, PA.

Rabbi Walter S. Wurzburger is the rabbi emeritus of Shaarei Tefilah in Lawrence, NY.

Dr. Deena Zimmerman is a pediatrician and a yo'etzet halakha in Israel.
The Orthodox Caucus' Task Force on Women & Orthodoxy views the 'Call to Discussion' as the first step in developing serious yet respectful dialogue on these and related issues that we believe deserve careful attention. It is hoped that after reading these pieces (which are presented in alphabetical order, by author), individuals and groups in the community will explore, develop and share ideas on these important topics. Symposia, guest lectures, classes, debate, and real as well as virtual discussion groups are but some of the ways for communities to generate their own implementation of this project. Those seeking assistance in developing appropriate programs or groups, may contact The Orthodox Caucus.

A Call to Discussion

The Orthodox Caucus is dedicated to grappling with difficult issues facing the Orthodox community. Currently the Caucus is addressing the concerns of women seeking both more active participation in mitzvot and increased public involvement in the community within a halakhic framework. A Task Force composed of rabbis, educators and laypersons was established for this purpose:

The women whose concerns the Task Force seeks to address are young and old, married and single, professionals in the workplace and homemakers. A growing number, but by no means all, have a high level of Jewish education. What these women share is a desire for increased opportunities to affirmatively express their love of Torah values as well as a sincere commitment to Halakha.

The members of the Task Force understand that a great many Orthodox Jews, including many women, are content with the religious status quo. We are also cognizant of the influence of feminism on some who promote involvement by women in the religious arena. The members of the Task Force seek neither to disturb those who are content nor to facilitate those feminist values antithetical to halakhic Judaism. We do seek to address the aspirations of committed Jewish women who are uncomfortable with the status quo and to meet their legitimate needs without compromising halakhic integrity.

Unfortunately, there has been little serious discussion in the Modern Orthodox community regarding enhanced religious expression for women.
Women expressing even mild dissatisfaction with the status quo are routinely dismissed as feminists not worthy of consideration, often in vituperative terms. Conversely, rabbis and other community leaders who express halakhic concerns about changes in community practices are derided as obstructionist by some advocating such changes. Each group questions the motivations of the other. We believe that our status as a community will be enhanced if we cease questioning motivation and undertake - seriously - a discussion of this important issue.

A sophisticated, respectful discussion of women's roles and practices not only enhances the spiritual life of devoted women, but also helps to improve Orthodox life for all men and women within the community. Encouraging discussion and growth in this area will benefit not only the men and women disenchanted with the current situation; it will also help those who themselves are comfortable with the status quo understand the frustration of others and thereby create an improved dynamic within the community. The potential contributions of women whose energies are channeled both personally and publicly to Torah and communal life are immeasurable.

With this in mind, the Task Force has identified a number of emerging roles and observances for Orthodox women in the synagogue and at life-cycle events. The practices described below, and the accompanying material, are not meant to either provide an exhaustive analysis or endorse any specific action. Rather, they are intended as a call to discussion of the issues involved. We anticipate that the materials will be widely disseminated within the community and will promote thorough and informed discussions marked by respect for disparate viewpoints. In the classes, symposia and lectures that we hope will emerge, we foresee improved opportunity for communication between community members and community rabbis.

Following this outline of practices selected by the Task Force is an initial collection of comments and opinions. We have deliberately avoided discussing women's tefila and the issue of agunot. These are very serious issues which deserve separate treatment.

**Life Cycle Events**

a. At the birth of a baby girl, some parents mark the occasion with a special ceremony, sometimes called a simchat bat or a zeved ha-bat. These celebrations may include the naming of the daughter, birkat ha-gomel by the mother, birkat ha-tov ve'ha-metiv, specially-composed ha-rachman paragraphs appended to the end of birkat ha-mazon, personal prayers composed by the parents, divrei Torah, and appropriate tzedakah and chezed initiatives undertaken in honor of the occasion.
b. *Bat Mitzva* celebrations have become the routine in many Modern Orthodox communities, and might include a *siyum* by the *bat mitzva* girl, year-long *cheved* projects, a direct address by the rabbi, and a *devar Torah* by the *bat mitzva* from the pulpit after Shabbat services in those synagogues where the synagogue is not used exclusively for prayer and women speak from the lectern at times other than prayer.

c. Weddings also offer women the opportunity to increase their active ceremonial involvement. Brides deliver a *devar Torah* at the engagement party and/or wedding celebration. A *Shabbat Kallah* is held for the bride and her friends and family, often on the day of the *asuruf*. The bride and her female family and friends gather together preceding the *badeken*, at which time they participate in singing and *divrei Torah*. The mother of the bride or groom or a female teacher of the bride speak under the *chupa*. Some brides recite *hav va'hemayim* on receiving their ring. Wedding invitations regularly include the mother's name ("Abraham and Sarah Cohen" instead of "Mr. and Mrs. Abraham Cohen"). Women deliver *divrei Torah* at the various *sheva berachot* celebrations during the week following the wedding.

d. Death, too, provides opportunities for increased involvement. Every community has women participating in its *Chevra Kadisha*. Women friends and family members often speak at funerals. Services at a *shiva* house are arranged so that women may comfortably join the prayers. Female mourners say *kaddish* at the burial, at *shiva* services, and in shul, the specific situation varying from community to community. Both parents' names ("Yitzchak ben Avraham ve'Sarah") are included on the tombstone (as is the custom of the Tzahal rabbinate).

In the Synagogue

a. Female educators serve as teachers, lecturers and scholars in residence in adult education programs, address shul dinners, serve as officers of the congregation, and participate in all the various committees of the synagogue.

b. Women increasingly participate in *shuirim* and *seudot shelishiti* on Shabbat, and attend daily *minyanim*, be it *shacharit, mincha*, or *ma'ariv*, when it does not conflict with their family responsibilities. A *mechitza* is permanently set up in the room where daily services are held so that women may attend regularly. Properly supervised child-care services are available on Shabbat and Yomtov. Synagogue-provided ritual items such as *siddurim*, *atzedaka* boxes, *besamim*, * lulavim* and *etrogim*, special texts for *kinot*, *selichot*, as well as sources books for *shuirim* are all available in the women's section.
just as in the men’s. Women choose to recite birkat ha-gomei when it is required from the women’s section during the Torah reading rather than in a more private setting.

c. Increased attention is given to assure that mechitza designs, while conforming to halakhic requirements, allow women to feel that they are fully part of the tzibur, allowing for a proper tefila experience. This includes providing sufficient space to avoid overcrowding, easy entrance to the women’s section, and the opportunity to clearly hear the shaliach tzibur, ba’al korei, and the rabbi. Mechitza designs are approved not only by the rabbi and the ritual committee, but by the women who are the ones most affected by them.
Raising Strong Daughters
Tobie Brandriss Goodman

How do we raise our daughters to believe that they count in the Orthodox community? How do we convey to them that their spirituality, their intelligence, and their love of Torah are very much valued and encouraged, and that in developing their spiritual lives and knowledge of Torah, they are ensuring a stronger community? How can we
foster their understanding that we take them seriously, that they are full partners in our people’s brat with Hashem. That we do not ask them to hide their intelligence, to inhibit their own development, or to stunt their ability to form strong opinions and speak out.

A girl’s bat mitzva observance can be a powerful vehicle for transmitting this message to our children. We should celebrate this milestone with our daughters in as meaningful a way as we celebrate the bnei mitzva of their brothers, and we should make it clear to them that their becoming a bat mitzva is as much a cause for celebration in the community. In our community a young man often marks his bar mitzva with a year of serious learning of a particular text, culminating in a public reading of his parasha, amid great celebration and pride in his achievement. We must find a way to celebrate a young woman’s reaching the age of mitzvot that is equally powerful for her, through an accepted, mainstream experience that stretches her to significant new heights. We must find settings in which our daughters can display their learning and their new strengths without being accused of showing off, being immodest, or just trying to copy the boys.

Becoming a bat mitzva carries with it obligations for which we need to begin training our daughters at an early age. We need to convey to them that we take their spirituality and their presence in shul seriously, and that we expect them, as members of a tzibbur, to be in shul on time and to daven at all the times one is supposed to. High standards and expectations will strengthen our girls, and, consequently, our families and communities.

Finally, we will strengthen ourselves as a community if we raise our sons to believe that all of us—they and their sisters, and eventually, their wives—have the obligation to reach the greatest heights we can as Jews. We need to help them understand that we are better off as a community if we are all as learned, as spiritual, and as connected to Hashem as each of us can be.