

Preface

One of the difficulties about a feminist view of things is that once you are deep into it, it is not only a radical transformer of everything, but also extremely compelling and apt to make you forget what things looked like from the other side. This may be why feminists are generally inclined to attribute all opposition to moral and intellectual shortcomings in their opponents. The feminist who can see the oppression of women in the trivia of every day life, in much the same way that the believer can see the hand of God in what to the atheist is the unremarkable course of nature, may also incline to the common religious view that since the truth is manifest, the fallen state of the heathen can be imputed only to Sin, or, in this case, to vested interests and conditioning.

However, the feminist way of looking at things is not at all manifest, and feminists must do their opponents the justice of recognizing this. Once we have done it, we may be more inclined to try to understand what it is which makes many people of good will resist the movement, and from that work out ways of making them more sympathetic.

—JANET RADCLIFFE RICHARDS¹

A Few Personal Remarks

I never used to think of myself as a feminist. Even today I am not totally comfortable with this label. My reservations begin with the obsessive preoccupation with gender that characterizes many of feminism's devotees (who seem to regard this as the ultimate yardstick by which all else is to be measured). I also resent feminism's ability to evoke a sense of alienation from a mainstream culture in which I have a great stake. Nevertheless, I believe that it is a revolutionary movement of tremendous importance and that it has much of value to teach us. In addition to feminism's direct message, there are lessons to be learned from the challenges that it poses to religious tradition. Religious believers ignore these at their own peril.

Having been born and raised in an Orthodox rabbinic family, I always had a strong sense of myself as a religious Jew. I was fortunate enough to have been daughter to a father who passionately loved books, learning, teaching, and me. Although he admired and respected independent women,

I think that his attitude toward Jewish feminism—to the extent that he had occasion to encounter it as such—was ambivalent: he was curious but also wary of the upheaval it appeared to augur for traditional Jewish life as he knew it. But as I was his only child until the age of twelve, he devoted a great deal of his personal time and effort to giving me the best Jewish education possible, and he let me know that he was proud of my knowledge. I was never made to feel that I must face any limits on that score.

This is not to say that I never experienced problems with being a Jewish woman. I did. Such problems had to do with feeling an outsider when men discussed Torah around the Sabbath dinner table and invoked arguments demonstrating Talmudic learning on a level beyond what even the private lessons with my father had given me. I admired and was envious of the sense of religious dedication and spiritual energy that these guests exuded. I also felt stabs of envy when they would describe the atmosphere in the *yeshivot* (academies) that they attended and their joy at the opportunity to meet with people whom they regarded as saintly and worthy of veneration. I found myself frustrated and occasionally even humiliated at synagogue celebrations on Simhat Torah (marking the end of the yearly cycle of Torah reading), when all the lively dancing and festivities were concentrated on the men's side of the synagogue, and the only active participation expected of women was to push and squirm in order to get a view. My sense of insult was stronger yet at being made to feel a pariah at ultra-Orthodox social gatherings where women were shoved out of sight.

My parents would have been surprised, however, to learn that one of the major factors that contributed indirectly to my feminist consciousness was a deliberate educational decision they made for me. Because they were both ardent lovers of Hebrew and determined that this should be my mother tongue, they chose to see to my Jewish education privately rather than send me to the yeshiva day school for girls that my father himself had founded. They considered this school unsuitable because it taught the sacred texts of tradition in an English-speaking environment. Thus it was that I received my general education in an ordinary United States public school—and began to sense a dissonance between women's passive role in Jewish religious life and the equality and opportunity that I encountered in the secular world. The segregated environment in which some of my religious women friends were educated appeared pale and impoverished in comparison. Nonetheless, these feelings were in the background and did not impose upon or jaundice my love and attachment to tradition in any major way.

After making *aliyah* (moving to Israel) as a young woman, I opted to study Jewish philosophy in an academic setting. Undoubtedly the greater part of my motivation lay in this field's being as close as I, as a woman, could get at the time to a formal grounding in higher-level study of sacred Jewish texts. My first introduction to feminism of the Jewish variety was

upon publication of Blu Greenberg's *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*,² which was also—to the best of my knowledge—the first book-length manifest written by an Orthodox feminist. I remember being disturbed by the book. Although I sympathized with many of the author's sentiments, I felt her attitude toward *halakhah* was too instrumentalist; she seemed to regard the halakhic process as a flexible means to achieve any goal one might choose. An insufficient appreciation for the fine points of halakhic deliberation from an *insider's* point of view meant that she had little chance of winning over the halakhic authorities she hoped to influence. In this sense, her point of view appeared somewhat removed from the more traditionalist religious environment steeped in Torah with which I identified and which I cherished. At the time, I wrote a review of her book expressing reservations to that effect,³ and I appeared in several debates with her on the topic.

More compelling for me than the issue of feminism was the clash between Jewish tradition and modernity in general. At the Hebrew University of Jerusalem I was exposed to scientific study of Judaism—submitting texts to historical philological analysis—which brought the clash into sharp relief. Modernist issues such as the conflict between science and religion, the impact of sociology on claims of halakhic integrity, and historical development and the notion of divine revelation—these were the bread and butter of my intellectual life and my form of religious quest. During this period I discovered the writings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the profound and saintly twentieth-century religious mystic. I felt that he was one of the few traditionalists whose avenue of response to these questions rose above the usual apologetics. These writings became a formative influence as I developed my own theology. The attempt to appropriate some of his ideas to contend with current problems that I was wrestling with became a major theme in my religious life.

My involvement as a teacher in the first post high-school program offering talmudic study for women in a yeshiva-like setting (then known as Beruria, and today as Midreshet Lindenbaum) also contributed to my lack of interest in feminist issues. Founded in Jerusalem in 1976 by Rabbi Chaim Brovender, Beruria pioneered the women's learning revolution that I shall discuss later. Here, in this little island of learning, where male rabbis and women cooperated to create an optimal Torah environment for women, I had no cause to feel oppressed. I had little doubt that I was participating in an exciting revolution, that its fruits were here to stay, and that it would only gain momentum as the years went by. But I felt no inclination to immerse myself in a movement called "feminism," whose interests were somewhat beyond my ken.

The initial push came with the first "Feminism and Orthodoxy" conference, which took place in New York in 1996. When Blu Greenberg, who

was then in charge of organizing the conference, invited me to participate, I was rather reluctant because I really did not feel sufficiently identified with the group of women behind the event or their political concerns. I had nothing against the move to enhance the position of women in Jewish life, but my interests were more philosophical. I therefore told Blu that I would come only if I could speak about a more theoretical issue: the potential impact of feminism on Orthodox Jewish theology.⁴ In other words, I was interested in using feminism as a handle on ideas that went beyond feminist concerns.

I was not prepared for the response that this topic evoked. The atmosphere at the talk was electric, and a flood of e-mails, telephone calls, letters, and lecture invitations ensued. Apparently, I had hit on a raw nerve in Orthodoxy: an issue everyone was struggling with but no one had properly articulated. I felt I had something unique to contribute and that I had a receptive audience.

An experience the following year stood in sharp contrast. I was invited to the Orthodox Forum, a closed meeting at Yeshiva University, the intellectual center of Modern Orthodoxy in the United States—an annual forum of handpicked invitees, rabbis, and academicians who formed part of the inner circle of this segment of Orthodoxy. The declared purpose was to discuss in a free and open atmosphere some of the burning current questions of Orthodoxy. Or so I thought. The theme of the conference that year was “human and societal influence on *halakhah*.” I was asked to review the modern period and to use women’s issues as a test case.

As an academician teaching in a university setting and in the intellectually open atmosphere established at Midreshet Lindenbaum, I expected to find the same spirit of inquiry at this forum. After all, it was a closed meeting. Surely the question of exposing “dirty laundry” was not an issue. I was entirely unprepared for the response my paper evoked. In it, I spelled out what I thought were some of the practical and theological challenges that feminism poses to the halakhic community. The paper was sent in advance to the conference participants, along with all the other papers to be discussed.

By the time I arrived at the conference I already had an intimation of the chilly reception awaiting me. Apparently the people who had invited me did not get what they had bargained for. Perhaps they relied on the opinions I expressed in my response to Blu Greenberg’s book, an article that sat well with establishment positions. I do not think that my position has changed substantially in the intervening years, but in the wake of the first Feminism and Orthodoxy conference I was driven to read some feminist literature, and I was invited to develop a course on the topic of Orthodoxy and feminism for a new gender studies program at Bar-Ilan University. As a research fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, I also benefited from participation in a workshop devoted to women’s issues. All of these factors probably served to sharpen my feminist sensibilities on a theoretical level, influencing how I phrased the issues.

Before my talk a few people came up to me surreptitiously, whispering words of encouragement and telling me that they “admired my courage.” What courage? I had no idea what they were talking about, but it did not bode well. It soon became obvious that members of the American Modern Orthodox establishment were not prepared to deal critically with the issues at hand. In the round of discussion after I presented an oral summary of the paper, the atmosphere was heavy and oppressive. The rabbis’ faces were somber, and everyone was determined to be politically correct—that is, in terms of the establishment. Nearly everyone who asked for the floor began with a variant of “I am very disturbed by . . .” The only one who dared support not only my questions but even my answers (and brought a personal message of thanks from his wife for giving voice to exactly what she herself was feeling) was an Israeli academician unconnected with Yeshiva University and independent of establishment disapproval.

Although the forum customarily leads to a volume of the papers presented in a series devoted to this purpose, that year none was published. They dared not publish a book with my talk, which had crossed the bounds of rabbinic fiat, and they dared not publish without it. The article subsequently passed through so many hands informally that I hardly felt the need to publish it, but I did so eventually under other auspices.⁵

The present book is an outgrowth of that paper and the one prepared for the conference the year before, augmented by further material developed in teaching the course at Bar-Ilan and drawing on other articles that I have published. Writing this book has been important to me. In a sense, it has afforded me the opportunity to engage in an exercise of “theological housecleaning,” forcing me to put in order a conglomeration of ideas that have been gestating for a long period of time. Feminism has merely provided the critical cause *célÈbre* on which to center these thoughts.

The Threat of Feminism to Orthodoxy

What so troubled my interlocutors at Yeshiva University? What is it in feminism that Orthodoxy finds so threatening?

In 1982, in a short and little publicized article,⁶ the influential Israeli thinker Yeshayahu Leibowitz declared that “the question of Women and Judaism is more crucial than all the political problems of the people and its state. Failure to deal with it seriously threatens the viability of the Judaism of Torah and Mitzvoth in the contemporary world.”⁷ I think that today, twenty years later, many people would concur; now more than ever they would regard the status of women in Jewish tradition as the greatest challenge to Torah Judaism. But, like Leibowitz himself, most Orthodox Jews today still see the problem as mainly a halakhic one; that is, in terms of the challenges posed to Orthodoxy on a practical level by the new role of

women in the Western world. To the extent that they view these challenges as a religious problem, it is mainly because they perceive the women's revolution, in its struggle for equality, as drawing on influences foreign to the hallowed practices of Judaism.

This struggle creates certain tensions, if not outright conflicts, with some of the established norms of *halakhah* and tradition. When the demand arises to find halakhic dispensation for women to learn Torah, don phylacteries [*tefillin*], assume positions of religious leadership and authority, or extricate themselves from failed marriages to husbands who won't grant a divorce, the question usually raised is: To what extent can such demands for change be legitimated from within the halakhic framework?

I believe, however, that this way of phrasing the challenge raised by the women's revolution is shortsighted and mistaken. Granted, there is a difference of opinion among the halakhic authorities over how radical a break with *halakhah* such changes entail. Granted also, women themselves are divided over how their struggle for legal and social equality in general society will change the way they live out their daily Jewish lives. On this level, however, the problem could be viewed as a matter of simple negotiation: the rabbinic authorities will give a little here, the women there, and peace will be had. The real problem is rather that the threat of the women's revolution is not limited to such practical issues; to understand it this way essentially trivializes the challenges. Even some of the more positive and sympathetic Orthodox treatments of women's newly defined needs⁸ fail to take into account the full depth of the feminist critique, a critique highlighting several aspects of the women's revolution that appear to be profoundly problematic for the foundations of Jewish belief.

While Orthodox leaders have not yet spelled out for themselves the broader implications of the women's revolution, I believe that some of them have an intuitive sense of what is involved. Symptomatic of this is the highly charged atmosphere that can accompany even the slightest suggestion of divergence from traditional ritual practice. The sheer energy of these responses, irrespective of their ideological orientation, is indication that the feminist critique has honed in on an issue critical to contemporary Jewish life. An outsider to traditional Judaism might understandably be perplexed by the level of agitation and volatile rhetoric. Why not have a woman rather than a man hold up the poles of a wedding canopy? And why shouldn't a woman make the ceremonial blessing at her family's Sabbath meal over the loaves of challah that she herself baked?

One reason for the disproportionately intense atmosphere surrounding such discussions is the nature of the issue. Even the slightest symbolic changes in ritual create a dissonance with primeval memories, associations, and traditional patterns of worship that have nurtured the spiritual self-image of Jewish women for centuries. For this reason, even an apparently trivial question about a woman actively participating in a private fam-

ily ceremony is not easily relegated to a circumscribed category of issues that a simple legal technicality can resolve. The changes suggested often relate to moral sensibilities that are pivotal to human experience, touching upon religious attitudes and principles that define our total vision of ourselves, the nature of human sexuality, the family, and society at large.

What, then, is the cost of minimizing gender differences and destroying the cultural halos with which tradition has surrounded them, as against the gains of greater self-fulfillment, freedom of expression, and independence for the women concerned? Is there a specific feminine contribution to society that would be lost if taken outside the home and brought into the public arena? Conversely, are the Jewish people forfeiting half of their spiritual talents and energies by confining the religious activity of women to the domestic sphere? Does acceptance of women's changing status in society necessarily lead to other positions that are often associated with feminism but that appear to be unequivocally contraindicated by *halakhah*, such as acceptance of homosexuality or abortion on demand?

These are important questions, but the arguments around them, compelling as they may be, do not tell the complete story either. The history of *halakhah* provides other examples of deep ideological shifts on issues at the heart of Jewish spirituality and its moral sensibilities. I am thinking here of the attitude of Jews to non-Jews, the toleration of secularists by religious Jews, and the move from more ritualistic to more philosophical forms of worship. Even when such changes appear to take place gradually and imperceptibly, without much explicit ideological fanfare, the perceptive onlooker can discern a causal connection between halakhic change and shifting societal attitudes.

Compounding this difficulty in the case of women, however, is the urgency of the issue. The change in women's status in the general world is proceeding so rapidly (albeit more quickly in some countries than in others) that the sense of incongruence and anomaly experienced by some Orthodox women is extremely pressing. Critical problems are being raised that require immediate and global solution, as is evidenced most concretely in the case of the *agunah*, which will be discussed later on. Under the circumstances, the traditional caution displayed in most halakhic decision-making is often perceived as applying a bandage to a wound that requires major surgery.

It is precisely in the combination of these two factors—the charged nature of women's issues and their urgency—that we find the uniqueness of the women's question in Judaism. What we have here is an ideological enterprise of major proportions. Changing the fundamental halakhic status of women has profound implications for the entire system. In effect, it constitutes a major upheaval of some of the very foundations of Jewish tradition, as we have known it for centuries. For this reason, it inevitably leads to a cluster of broader second-order theological issues concerning the relationship between religious law and the values or ideals that it may be understood to embody. More profoundly it forces us to confront the relationship

between the divine word and human interpretation and to ascertain the extent to which a religion based on the notion of a singular foundational revelation (the revelation at Sinai) can accommodate changes in the evolving moral sensibilities of its adherents. In this sense the women's issue can be said to constitute the test case par excellence of the ability of a two-thousand-year-old tradition to adjust to modern human and social realities without undermining its authority.

In the developing theory of the feminist movement, the problematic implications for Judaism of the change in women's status are being spelled out most explicitly. This may be why the very mention of feminism so often generates extreme anxiety and discomfort in Orthodox circles. Within mainstream Orthodoxy the term frequently conjures up a specter of nearly demonic proportions, as evidenced by the vehement objection to its inclusion in the title of the recent series of international conferences on feminism and Orthodoxy (and by the amount of casuistry concerning the order in which the two words were placed). Even some of the younger women who have palpably benefited from advances of previous generations of feminists prefer to dissociate themselves from this label and the cognitive, social, and emotional estrangement from established tradition that they sense it will create for them.

I contend that feminist thinking cannot be sidestepped, as it raises a new point of view with insights, values, and moral overtones that are, at least in part, intuitively persuasive for modern (and particularly postmodern) thinkers. These new perceptions constitute a genuine challenge to the traditional world-picture, one that sooner or later has to be acknowledged. This does not mean that Jewish traditionalists are obliged to accept the perceptions en masse or even partially. I do believe, however, that greater familiarity with the feminist critique will lead to the conclusion that response entails more than technical solutions to practical halakhic problems. For traditionalists, "recognizing the enemy" in a clear-eyed manner should be the first step in assessing what it is that Orthodoxy is confronting and in developing a reasoned and adequate response.

I believe that feminism need not be seen as a threat to traditional Judaism, and that Jewish tradition itself provides ways and means of dealing with the challenges. My optimism does not stem from a definitive picture of what these ways and means entail. It stems rather from a belief in belief itself, and the conviction that the true measure of belief lies in its ability to assimilate the lessons to be learned from whatever challenges it is destined to face. The challenges that feminism presents are challenges that carry within them the potential to enhance Judaism and make it more meaningful for all its believers, male and female alike. Only if halakhic Judaism is prepared to face the full implications of this apparent threat, however, with faith rather than fear, can it develop ways to adopt whatever in this movement is of genuine value and incorporate it into religious life. Filtered through the

prism of tradition in a constructive manner, this social revolution has the potential to enhance rather than destroy the foundations of Torah, while deepening its relevancy for our time.

About This Book

Beyond a personal interest in clarifying my own thoughts, I had a number of audiences in mind as I wrote this book. The first group of readers are those who, like myself and my own close circle of students and friends, have been touched, disturbed, and excited by the challenges that feminism raises. These are people who have a great love for their tradition but seek to bridge the gap between its teachings with respect to women and the *de facto* position of women in the world we now live in. Beyond the practical question of finding some *modus vivendi* with the *halakhah*, they struggle for solutions to the deeper dissonance this gap creates—wondering whether it is in any way possible to make theological sense of it all.

In addition to this group, I hope to engage another type of traditionalist reader, more conservatively inclined. I would like to believe that beyond those who prefer to dismiss “so-called religious feminists” as a bunch of troublemakers, there are some traditionalists who would genuinely like to understand what all the fuss is about. These are people who are truly puzzled, sometimes asking themselves: What do these religious feminists want? They claim to be loyal Jews. Why then do they rebel against the word of God and a tradition that has served the Jewish people so well for two thousand years?

The third group that I invite to this discussion are Jewish and non-Jewish scholars and students of religion and of feminism at large. For them the Jewish example will serve as a test case for many of the broader issues raised by the confrontation between feminism and religion.

The diversity of the audience to which this book is addressed creates certain technical problems. Many of the names and concepts that I employ will be familiar to some of my readers. Others will require explanation to augment a more limited knowledge of Jewish texts and history or of general philosophy. Definitions of the Jewish terms will follow at least the first time that they are introduced. Regarding general philosophical concepts, I have tried (with limited success, I fear) to overcome the academician’s propensity for professional jargon, and to provide at least minimal explanations. I have included copious notes and references to recent work that has been done on various topics discussed, particularly in Israel. Although much of it is written in Hebrew, I believe the English-language reader should be aware of its existence.

The book itself is divided into five parts. The first three correspond to stages in the development of feminism in the Jewish context, representing

progressive incorporation of the feminist critique. The fourth part offers my own resolution of the Orthodox feminist's dilemma, while the fifth looks at current trends and speculates about the future.

The first stage consists of acknowledging that a problem exists. In the attempt to supply some of the background information necessary for appreciating this point, I begin chapter 1 with a survey of the history and tenets of feminism at large. I then proceed with an overview of Jewish law, how women fit into its hierarchies, and how this placement has affected their role in Jewish religious tradition. In briefly outlining various trends in feminist thought, I also introduce philosophical concepts that influenced its development. Inasmuch as some of these concepts are critical to understanding my reasoning later, I strongly urge readers of various stripes to peruse this chapter, so that we may start our discussion on common ground. The same may be said for central halakhic concepts and premises that figure prominently in subsequent discussions in the book. The chapter concludes with a description of the dilemma of the Orthodox woman today, resulting from the clash between basic assumptions of each system.

Chapter 2 opens with a brief historical account of what women thought of their situation, focusing upon some of the sources of their discontent. After tracing the development of Jewish feminism as an organized movement in the modern period, I continue with a survey and evaluation of various conservative responses to discrimination against women.

The second part of the book (chapters 3 through 6) describes what I define as the second stage of Jewish feminism: the attempt on the part of *halakhah*-abiding women to explore practical ways and means of improving their status in Judaism by working within the halakhic system. Chapter 3 reviews the objective and subjective constraints that various ideological, historical, and political factors have imposed upon this system over the ages.

Chapter 4 maps out the attempts of Modern Orthodoxy to provide viable solutions within such constraints, developing "meta-halakhic" theories that view *halakhah*, as it were, "from above." Fueling such efforts is the hope they will enable a comprehensive explanation of women's status in Jewish tradition and supply reliable and objective criteria for determining the validity of suggestions for change.

Chapter 5 assesses the adequacy of Modern Orthodoxy's meta-halakhic efforts. I begin with a comparison of the disparate responses of halakhic decisors to two seemingly parallel innovations in the lives of contemporary Orthodox women: the expansion of opportunities for advanced study of the sacred texts of tradition and the spread of women-only prayer groups. The discussion then extends to other anomalies that feature in halakhic decisions regarding women. The chapter ends with the skepticism of some Orthodox feminists as to whether any meta-halakhic theory is capable of maintaining legal consistency and freedom from bias.

The third part of the book (chapters 6 through 9) introduces a third stage of Jewish feminism. Feminists at this stage maintain that it does not suffice to work with the halakhic system as it stands, devising practical solutions on a piecemeal basis. They adopt a more radical approach, seeking to identify the deeper attitudinal reasons for the male-biased nature of the halakhic tradition. As described in chapter 6, some see the heart of the problem in unfortunate but extraneous sociological influences. Others view it as more inherent, stemming from the basically male-oriented imagery of monotheistic religion, which lends itself to a patriarchal social order. Both groups seek ways and means of restoring balance to the tradition without breaking continuity with it, by finding precedents and support for their feminist contentions in some aspect of the Jewish past.

Chapter 7 assesses various shortcomings of such revisionism, whether sociological or theological, as an appropriate response to the feminist critique. To my mind, these shortcomings provide sufficient grounds for traditionalist dismissal of this approach. The chapter culminates, however, with a more radical theological conclusion implied by third-stage feminism, one I regard as the heart of the feminist challenge to Orthodoxy and to monotheistic religion in general: that identification of an all-pervasive bias in Scripture poses a threat, in principle, to the notion of verbal, dictated revelation, upon which the entire authority of historic Judaism rests.

Chapter 8 reviews another track taken by third-stage feminism, one that focuses on the classical halakhic medium, but seeks to modify it by adopting a more proactive vision of law. This track is associated with a current post-modernist vogue in Anglo-American theory that finds support for this vision within Jewish tradition itself. I conclude that this approach holds some promise for feminists, but requires qualification.

The fourth part of the book (chapters 9 through 11) sets up what I regard as a more viable model, suggesting that continuity with tradition can be maintained by regarding the halakhic system as a living and dynamic organism that can only grow by positive acceptance and affirmation of its historical and intellectual legacy. Chapter 9 first develops this idea on the practical halakhic plane; that is, examining the role of interpretive traditions in constraining the freewheeling influence of postmodernist thinking on legal theory. I hope to demonstrate that precisely those women who are most affected by the clash between feminism and Orthodoxy are the ones with the greatest potential for resolving the problem.

Chapter 10 continues application of the more open-ended approach of tradition on a more theoretical plane. I regard this chapter as the spiritual heart of this book; it is here that I address the most penetrating level of the feminist critique. In articulating a theological position capable of incorporating a more sophisticated understanding of the mechanics of revelation alongside solid reaffirmation of its divine origins and claims upon halakhic

commitment, I seek to break down the usual distinction between naturalistic, historic processes and claims of transcendence.

Chapter 11 anticipates some critical responses to this approach on the part of feminists and traditionalists. I respond briefly to their possible objections to a view of revelation that relies on a conflating of the divine and the human.

The fifth part, an epilogue, offers a qualified prognosis of developments and their contribution to Jewish life. It also suggests that our study of the meeting between feminism and Orthodoxy might provide a more general paradigm of interaction between long-standing traditions (even when not based on claims to divine authority) and the transformative power of interpretive revolutions in a manner that is beneficial to both.

Some Concluding Caveats

Because of the diverse nature of my audience, there are chapters that will appeal more to some readers, while others may find them redundant or a preaching to the converted. I expect that the bare bones of my analysis will appear radical to some of my traditionalist readers; indeed, I intend to take the feminist critique seriously to the extent of squarely acknowledging some of its claims and following them to their most extreme conclusions. For this reason many of these readers will take offense at much of what is included in the chapters that compose the first three parts of this book. On the other hand, after reading the concluding chapters, another segment of my readership may find my own suggestions disappointingly theoretical and vague. Although these suggestions may reveal some of my personal inclinations, they do not attempt definitive answers to such questions as “Should women marry early and have lots of children or dedicate years of their life to high-level study of Talmud?” and “Should women develop their own uniquely feminine spirituality or strive to replicate male forms of worship?” Worse yet, they may appear to the feminist purist as overwilling to compromise the feminist agenda.

I have already encountered the mix of responses I describe. After I delivered the address at the first Feminism and Orthodoxy conference that forms the theological core of this book (chapter 10), I was told that one of the non-Orthodox feminists who attended was quite pleased with what she regarded as its surprising audacity. The next year, however, when I was asked to address the practical issue of changing Orthodox ritual,⁹ I delivered a traditionalist response that she considered a great letdown. In her view I had completely “climbed down the tree.”

I, however, regard the two positions as part of one and the same piece. My aim in developing a Jewishly acceptable theological approach to feminism is, on the one hand, to achieve maximum intellectual integrity in the

reading of canonized texts—without engaging in grotesque and morally obtuse postures of fundamentalism or unconvincing apologetics. This integrity involves admitting that, historically speaking, the Torah has both described and prescribed a patriarchal society. Disturbing as this may be, I believe that it need not be the end of the story and that Jewish tradition itself provides hope that an authentic understanding of Torah can accommodate what is, to all intents and purposes, an egalitarian ethos.

On the other hand, I *am* ideologically committed to the tradition as it stands as the basic grammar that governs the way that I relate to the world and my religious experience. To accept the tradition means to agree to speak in a certain way, to think in certain terms, to attribute to bottom-line formulas the formal status that tradition has always accorded them, and to articulate responses within their regulative constraints. The interpretations may change with the times; the formulas will remain the same. As R. Kook wrote (regarding the need to move beyond primitive understanding of the divinity of Scripture): “Torah from heaven is an example of all the generalities and particulars of beliefs, in the relationship between their articulation and their inner essence, the *latter* of which is the principle sought by faith.”¹⁰

To be sure, the question “Is at all possible to distinguish between form and essence?” is real. It has been the subject of philosophical debate throughout the ages. It may well be that the residual influences of form on essence must always linger. Something of the irrational reverence for the past is preserved in the pomp and ceremony of the British monarchy, even though no subject of the United Kingdom regards this form of government as anything more than a medieval relic. In the same way, some remnant of the symbolic power of the language of Jewish tradition may be retained with regard to women’s issues—even after having undergone so extensive a process of interpretation that the original meaning appears to have died the death of a thousand qualifications.

My response to this possibility is encapsulated in two of my favorite aphorisms from the philosophical writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein. The first:

Tradition is not something a man can learn; not a thread he can pick up when he feels like it, any more than a man can choose his own ancestors. Someone lacking a tradition who would like to have one is like a man unhappily in love.¹¹

But because simply having a tradition is not enough, we now turn to the second adage:

An honest religious thinker is like a tightrope walker. He almost looks as though he were walking on nothing but air. His support is the slenderest imaginable. And yet it really is possible to walk on it.¹²

On occasion, to retain its identity, every generation must perform major acrobatics, stretching the past in order to create continuity with its present. The tightrope may not hold forever, but it is crucial that it be capable of at least temporarily bearing the weight of its burden safely.

To all my readers let me point out that the object of my enterprise is neither political nor practical. It is rather an attempt to understand the significance and ramifications of feminism to Judaism from a theological perspective. Perhaps part and parcel of the theological perspective that I adopt is that there can be no definitive and final answer to many of the questions that arise. Yet to the extent that ideas influence the course of everyday life, my understanding may help traditionalists and feminists form some degree of rapprochement between the ideas that seem to divide them. In this sense the theological perspective may be a useful tool in formulating practical policy as well.

Even in this limited sense, my work is not finished. It is just a beginning, one that I expect will provoke a variety of detractors, critics, and embellishers of a more constructive sort. I welcome all of these. If this book succeeds in merely opening discussions or bringing discourse to new and more fruitful levels, it will have accomplished its task. I look forward to learning from any discussion that may follow.