

Religious Celebration - 1993

Are we living as if we were conscious of the presence of God and are we expressing every day something of... [God's] love? (Lily Montagu, Sermon, Berlin 1928)

Issue

The role of women in the expression of spirituality and interpretation of Jewish tradition in individual and communal life; the celebration of religious ceremonies in relation to women and congregation.

Background

"Just as women were oriented inward, so did Liberal Judaism place ultimate authority for belief and practice within the individual soul," wrote Lily Montagu, a founder of the Liberal Movement in England and the World Union for Progressive Judaism in the early part of the 20th century. She touched on many aspects which engage Reform Jewish women today, among them spirituality, as she wrote of the role of organized religion in the "evolution of personal religion." She would have understood the present-day awareness of the special bonding of women which grows out of the shared experience of everyday events.

More than twenty years have passed since the first woman was ordained as a rabbi in Reform Judaism. Many have followed not only in the Reform but now also in the Reconstructionist and Conservative Movements. Women have also been invested as Reform and Conservative cantors. This parallels the number of lay women in leadership positions in congregational and Jewish communal life. They have gained self-confidence in expressing in public their spirituality, learned not from theological institutions but from study and through seeing the holiness in their own experience of life.

While tradition in Judaism throughout the ages honored the woman as priestess of the home, she nevertheless endured and still endures many limitations. Her experience has been omitted from life-cycle rituals and her prayers have not been considered part of the main body of Jewish liturgy.

Now women are not only celebrating traditional life-cycle events but are also creating their own new rituals which connect their religious faith with their daily living. There are new prayers for childbirth, girl baby naming, special birthdays and other events. Women are studying Jewish sources and writing midrashim, interpretations of texts. What is needed is an acceptance that such ceremonies, commentaries and prayers rise out of authentic experience. They are not only the separate worship of women but are part of the mainstream of Jewish spiritual expression. Heeding God's command for moral and social action, women feel a special obligation to transform their homes, communities and society. In their personal inner search they are connecting their spirituality to the Jewish tradition, to their individual and collective experience, to the world and to God.

Resolution

Even as we acknowledge the great gains by Reform Jewish women in public participation in communal and congregational religious life, the Women of Reform Judaism call upon all affiliates to:

1. Circulate, read and use the new book of prayers, *Covenant of the Heart*, published by the Women of Reform Judaism.
2. Educate members to write and use new prayers of special significance to women and new midrashim that acknowledge feminist interpretations of texts and encourage them to write and participate in new

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- ceremonies that celebrate or pertain to life-cycle events of special meaning to women.
3. Encourage use of women's prayers and midrashim as part of congregational worship.
 4. Propose and establish congregational standards for the celebration of life cycle events such as bar or bat mitzvah that are consistent with the religious and spiritual significance of such occasions and that discourage celebration excesses.
 5. Promote the expression of spiritual meanings in all aspects of life, at home, in Sisterhood projects, in community.