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# Talking with Blu Greenberg

William Novak

**B**LU GREENBERG IS A WELL-KNOWN WRITER AND LECTURER ON JEWISH WOMEN'S ISSUES, AND THE AUTHOR OF THREE BOOKS: *ON WOMEN AND JUDAISM: A VIEW FROM TRADITION* (Jewish Publication Society, 1981); *How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household* (Simon & Schuster, 1983); and *Black Bread: Poems, After the Holocaust* (Ktav, 1994). She lives in Riverdale, New York, with her husband Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, a prominent liberal Orthodox teacher and writer, and president of Clal, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership; they have five grown children. We spoke in Boston on July 18, 1995, and continued the interview during several subsequent phone calls.

*I read about you most recently in Rodger Kamenetz's fascinating book, The Jew in the Lotus, about a group of American Jews who traveled to Dharamsala, India, in the fall of 1990 to meet with the Dalai Lama. How did you feel about his account of that experience?*

I think he did a great job, and he captured the theological and interfaith issues especially well. The book brought back memories of an extraordinary experience which I'm grateful I had, although I believe I played more of a part than the "kosher police" role that Rodger ascribed to me. It's also amazing how many people have mentioned the book, even in the Orthodox world.

*At one point Kamenetz quotes Moshe Waldoks, another participant, who suggests that it must have been a new experience for you and Yitz to be*

*occupying the right-wing position.*

That's true. And maybe Rodger was doing us a favor by bringing that up, because many Orthodox Jews see you as a little suspect when you're involved in an interfaith dialogue.

*Did anyone have a problem with your going? Did anyone ask, in effect—Dalai? Lamah?*

One Jewish newspaper attacked us for, as they put it, "Dillying with the Dalai," but I didn't hear too much of that. But I myself went with some apprehension about the whole question of *avodah zarah* [alien practices], and my antennae were up. I saw great veneration for the Dalai Lama, and I was trying to decide whether the people in that community were relating to him as a deity. It's a complicated question, but in the end I didn't feel there was any problem.

After we returned, I organized an American tour for two Tibetan Buddhist educators who came over to visit eight American Jewish summer camps. The Tibetan community is struggling with how to preserve its culture and identity now that they're in exile, and the people in our delegation had spoken about the importance of summer camps in building their Jewish identities.

*Did the Tibetans visit Orthodox camps, too?*

Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, secular—the whole range. They were intrigued by the swimming pools, and by the idea that you can teach commitment and identity without asceticism. In their report, they wrote about the place of pleasure and enjoyment in maintaining continuity. They were also moved by the strong personal relationships they saw, and by the fact that some of the kids they met could speak Hebrew. This year I'm hoping to bring them back to visit Jewish day schools.

*I love that moment in the Kamenetz book where the Dalai Lama asks his Jewish visitors about the theme of exile, which is so ingrained in our liturgy and ritual. "So after Israel was established," he says, "did some of these traditions change—or not yet?" I love that "yet."*

It's amazing how relevant these issues are to their own situation. You know, I felt a tremendous sense of clarity when I was there. Maybe it was the air, and the natural beauty of the mountains, but it was a clarifying experience. Although I entered a number of temples and enjoyed watching

the colorful rituals, I never had the feeling I was crossing any borders.

*You must have been worried about that, because I didn't even ask the question.*

I guess I was. At the outset, for example, I was concerned about how we would address the Dalai Lama. The common term is "His Holiness," but for me, as a halakhic Jew, that was problematic, and I raised that question to the exasperation of some members of our group.

As I said, I was worried about ascribing to him a sense of deity. But eventually, I considered the phrase a term of honor. The first time we entered the room to meet the Dalai Lama, he was already seated there. One member of our group, Jonathan Omer-Man, had a disability from an illness, and walked with difficulty. When the Dalai Lama saw Jonathan walking slowly with his braces, he got right up and went over to help Jonathan into his chair. For someone who is so greatly venerated to be so unconcerned with his own honor and position—well, for that act of compassion and humility alone, in my mind, he warrants the title His Holiness.

*What were your other impressions of the Dalai Lama?*

He's a very devoted and caring leader. Among other things, I was impressed at the intensity and the concentration of his listening. Usually, when people get to that level of adoration, they no longer listen. But the Dalai Lama was a great listener who soaked up every word and thought about it. The other thing that struck me was his laugh. He loves humor and loves to laugh, which seems to characterize his whole style of leadership, which is quite joyous despite the grave issues he deals with every day.

*Let's talk a little about you, now, starting with your childhood.*

I was born in Seattle in 1936, and I grew up there as the middle of three sisters, which is a good place to be. My father was a rabbi by training, but not by profession. My mother always said she would not have married a congregational rabbi, and she cautioned me not to, either. My parents met in New York: my mother had grown up on the Lower East Side, and my father met her while he was at Yeshiva University, which used to be in lower Manhattan.

*I gather that your parents were born in America. What about their parents?*

Actually, my father was born in Chernovitz, and came here as an infant. His father, Moshe Yehuda Genauer, came over in 1906, after a series of pogroms in Galicia, which was then part of Austria. He left his wife behind in Chernovitz, who was pregnant at the time with my father. I'll never cease to be amazed at how these young Jewish families endured these separations, the men leaving their wives and children behind, knowing they wouldn't see them again for years, until they could afford to bring them over. My grandfather planned to be a peddler in New York, but when he saw all the other *landsmen* doing the same thing, he decided to move on. It was during the Gold Rush, and he got on a train heading for Alaska. But when he got to Seattle he stayed.

*And he worked there as a peddler?*

Yes, although not for long. One day he bought a suit from a wealthy man, and when he returned to his little room, he laid the suit out on his cot and found a diamond pin in the pocket. He walked back to the man's house, but the wife didn't want to let him in a second time—until he showed her the pin. Her husband happened to be president of the Rainier National Bank, and as a reward for my grandfather's honesty he gave him an unlimited line of credit. My grandfather opened a men's clothing business, M. Genauer & Co., and within six months he was able to bring over his wife, Esther, and two small sons.

*What kind of Jew was your grandfather?*

Although Chernovitz had been a hotbed of Hasidism, my grandfather believed in a Talmud education. He sent his sons to a yeshiva in New York to learn; that was the family tradition.

*Did your father become a rabbi?*

Yes and no. He received his *smikhah* [rabbinic ordination] in New York, but then he returned to Seattle to work in the business along with his five brothers. The families all lived within a few blocks of each other on 33rd Street, and I grew up with a lot of wonderful and funny cousins.

*Was there a store in Seattle where all the uncles worked?*

It was basically a wholesale operation, but with a heart. People from the shul came in, and so did all the baseball players from the local farm teams. Incidentally, M. Genauer & Co. stayed alive until 1991, and during all those years the firm continued to do business with the Rainier National Bank.

*Many otherwise observant immigrants kept their businesses open on Saturdays. What about your grandfather?*

The business was always closed on Shabbos and on holidays. At one point my grandfather had an opportunity to buy the Terminal Sales Building, the Seattle equivalent of the Empire State Building, but the same no-nonsense Jew who returned that diamond pin turned down the building because some of the tenants would have stayed open on Shabbos. Otherwise, I would have been one of the heirs to a great piece of property.

*Are your parents still alive?*

Yes, they live near us in Riverdale. My father is eighty-eight, and he still learns every day through *Daf Yomi*. He was very involved in our Jewish education, and as a kid I often sat and studied with him. Whenever he read or heard an interesting *vort*, an interpretation of a text, he'd share it with us—and he does so to this day. Mostly he studies Torah and Talmud, but he has some other favorites too, like *Sefer Ha-Mo'adim*, which he looks over before every holiday. He's living proof of how you can learn something new even on the hundred and first reading of the same passage, and I grew up with that ethic. My father loved learning so much that during all the years when he was working, before leaving the house each morning he used to study Gemara for an hour with his friend Emanuel Rackman. I can also remember my parents arguing about how many *seforim* [holy books] should be taken on a family vacation.

*Tell me a little about your mother.*

My mother is the salt of the earth, the practical one in our family. Also, the straightest person I know. You can count on her for the total truth, which can sometimes be tough for a kid—even for a middle-aged woman—who doesn't like criticism. Parents have to lie a little to generate self-esteem in their children. Unfortunately, my mother does not know how to lie. But she can get away with it because she takes care of the whole extended family. She's very independent minded and also a great predictor of national elections. She's never been wrong, even on Truman and Dewey. So I always ask her who's going to win and then I go out and hunt up a betting partner.

My mother was nineteen when she married my father and moved to Seattle. In the late 1930s, when my mother was pregnant with my younger sister, her mother died in New York. My paternal grandfather, the family

patriarch, decided that because my mother was just a few weeks from giving birth, she shouldn't be told about her mother's death until after the baby was born. So my mother never sat shivah for her own mother. She learned about it later and was quite angry.

*Did you learn about this at the same time she did?*

I didn't know about it until the 1980s, when my mother told me. I was quite shocked—first, because it had happened at all, and second, because she had never mentioned it. I felt terrible for my mother, but that's the way things used to be, when men routinely made decisions about women's lives. In fairness, I should point out that my grandfather did this with the best of intentions: he was afraid this terrible news would cause a problem in the pregnancy. Previously, my mother had had two miscarriages.

*Was your mother as religiously inclined as your father?*

Yes, although she had no formal Jewish education. Her two brothers went to *cheder*, and both of them broke with Orthodoxy, while my mother and three of her four sisters remained Orthodox. Around the time my older sister went to Israel my mother started saying the full version of the bedtime Sh'ma, so I think she must have struck some kind of bargain with God with regard to my sister's safety.

*As you were growing up, was the level of observance in your community appreciably different from what you'd find in a similar community today?*

In a few small ways. Men wore yarmulkes at home or in shul, but never in the street, like today. And the dress code for women—we wore sleeveless, we had Young Israel dances, there was no women-at-the-back-of-the-bus stuff. My father used to say that when he was young, nobody worried about the ingredients in candy, and he and his brothers ate mallow bars, which was unthinkable even when I was a child. People were attentive to kashrut, but not like today. Our local kosher bakery wasn't *shomer Shabbos*, but we didn't consider that a big problem. There was one kosher butcher, and everybody trusted him; there was a general unspoken sense of "kosher enough."

*You obviously lived within walking distance of your shul.*

It was two miles away, and I loved that walk with my father and my uncles. The shul was a very comfortable place: I knew everybody, and I had my cheeks pinched quite a lot. The shul building still exists, but today it's a black cultural arts center.

*Did you experience any anti-Semitism in Seattle?*

A little. When I was seven, a kid on the next block threw a mud-pie into my eyes, and I had some vague sense that this was because I was Jewish. And one day when my sisters and I—five, seven, and nine—walked past the corner house, some kids yelled out, “Hey, are you girls Jewish? Ooh, you killed Jesus Christ!” After school I asked my mother, “Who’s Jesus Christ?”

“Why?” she said.

“Because we killed him.”

That was my introduction to the charge of deicide. There were other little reminders, and in fifth grade, I remember four Jewish friends and I marching smartly off to the principal to complain that somebody had called us “dirty Jews.”

*Were these incidents much of a problem for you?*

I really don’t think so. I had a warm, loving, and mostly innocent childhood. I also had a lot of structure in my life, not only in terms of school and Talmud Torah, but with all our chores. My mother was big on chores, and we had to dust and vacuum and set the table to prepare for Shabbos. Another chore was polishing our father’s shoes. Can you imagine that today? He’d call out, “Girls, who wants a mitzvah?” And we’d run to do it. I should have tried that with my own kids—the Tom Sawyer approach to Judaism.

*Was there one particular value or theme that was especially strong in your childhood?*

The mitzvah of *hakhnasat orchim* [hospitality to guests]. World War II began when I was three, and there were two army bases nearby. Every Friday night my father would go to shul and bring home any Jewish soldier who had a weekend furlough. In our community, a Jewish soldier could go to shul and know he had a meal and a place to sleep; my mother didn’t need advance notice. Our family got to know a number of soldiers, because a couple of dozen came to us on a regular basis. They would sleep on mattresses on the floor of our living room, which was sometimes lined wall to wall with soldiers.

*Was your father a soldier, too?*

He had a limp, and three children, but his younger brothers, the twins, were in the war. His youngest brother was studying in a yeshiva in Poland. He made it out on one of the last boats, and eventually arrived in Seattle via Shanghai. But he, too, was a full partner in the business because

the family believed in supporting Jewish learning.

*In some respects your childhood was very different from the one your children have experienced.*

Sometimes I wonder if our children will ever be able to look back on their childhood with this much warmth. My own childhood was protected, but at the same time we were also very free. One enormous difference is that we didn’t worry about crime. By the time we moved to Far Rockaway my mother was cautioning me about all the terrible things that could happen.

*When, exactly, did you move to Long Island?*

In 1946, when I was ten. My father continued in the family business, except that he now worked out of New York. I went to H.I.L.I. day school and Central Yeshiva High School for girls. After that came Brooklyn College, and at night I went to Teachers Institute at Yeshiva University in mid-town. Classes ended at 9:45, and I’d walk over to Penn Station on the other side of town. I got to Far Rockaway around eleven at night, and walked home from the train station by myself. Of course, that life is over. Today I wouldn’t even let my daughters go to the mailbox at that hour.

*How did you meet Yitz?*

On a blind date in the summer of 1955. We met in front of the lions at the New York Public Library. I had just decided that I was going to Israel the following month on a Teachers Institute program. Yitz and I talked about it, and he actually came home with me to Far Rockaway to help me convince my parents. There was a huge rainstorm that night, and he ended up staying over at our house. We had three dates before I left for Israel.

*Did you already know that this was looking serious?*

No, but I knew it soon after I returned—and certainly well before *he* knew! When we were married, in June 1957, Yitz was starting a new job as the Hillel rabbi at Brandeis. By the way, he could have stayed there; Art Green got this wrong in your interview with him [*Kerem*, Spring 1995]. Yitz left Brandeis not because Sachar found him threatening, but because he wanted to complete his doctorate at Harvard. Earlier, Yitz had been planning to go to medical school with the idea of becoming a psychiatrist, but at the last moment the fellowship he was expecting fell through. And in those days the idea of a woman supporting her husband through nine years of medical school, while postponing a family—that was unthinkable.

*What were your impressions of Brandeis?*

I had grown up with very little contact with non-Orthodox Jews, and I don't think I had ever been in a Conservative or Reform synagogue. On Rosh Hashanah I got to services early, and a few minutes later a young man came in and sat beside me. Well, I wouldn't have been any more surprised if the earth had opened up and swallowed me. I moved to another empty row, and another young man sat beside me, so I got up and moved again. Yitz hadn't mentioned that there was no *mechitzah* [partition] here.

*Wasn't that a problem for him, too?*

I tend to be more conservative by nature. If he so much as changes the melody for kiddush, it really annoys me. He'll say, "How can I possibly change people's attitudes if you grumble when I change the tune for kiddush?" I don't think I would have been open to feminism if I hadn't been married to Yitz. Years ago, in the 60s, we had some young couples at our house and Yitz was explaining a ruling in the Talmud that a woman is allowed to make kiddush. And I, the smart-alec rebbetzin, said, "Well, we don't want any of *that*." Over the years he has pulled me, sometimes kicking and screaming, into different worlds.

*Such as?*

When Mount St. Vincent, a Catholic college near our house, asked him to teach a course on Judaism, he was too busy to do it. "But I'd be willing to co-teach it with my wife," he said, and they accepted the idea. He left after one semester, and I stayed on.

*You said a moment ago that without Yitz you wouldn't have become a feminist. Do you really mean that?*

Well, I'm not sure there's another Orthodox rabbi in the country who would have encouraged his wife to take the positions I took. Now it's true that Yitz wasn't vulnerable in the usual way, because at the time he wasn't a congregational rabbi. But he has never objected or tried to stop me, even when I came out in favor of Orthodox women rabbis. He didn't agree with me then, although he does now. We're forever discussing things, and I've learned so much from him.

*I'm sure you're not the only one in this marriage who has learned a few things.*

It's not a one-way street. But when I need to investigate something,

or I'm looking for a source, he'll usually know it. Just the other day I asked Yitz something, and when he didn't know, I was really surprised. Sometimes I'll call him at the office with a question, and he'll say, "You'll find the book you need in the fourth bookcase, third shelf up, toward the left." The man really knows his books.

*Let's go back to your year in Israel. Is that when you studied with Nechama Leibowitz.*

Yes, and she was one of the most brilliant and exciting teachers I ever had. I studied with her at a Hebrew teachers' institute, but in those days she was teaching everywhere—from kibbutz seminars to army bases.

On the first day of class, I walked this woman who looked like a mendicant, and it turned out to be Nechama. She was familiar not only with Rashi, but with Tosfos, Ramban, Ibn Ezra, and all the other classical commentators. Although I'd had an excellent Jewish education, I had never known a woman who could teach the *meforshim* [commentators]. As a model for a learned Jewish woman, she was extraordinary.

*Is it possible to describe the sort of things you learned from her?*

As we studied the *meforshim*, she taught us to figure out what their questions were. We were trying to see the text through previous generations who had pored over every jot and tittle, and it was highly instructive to look at it through their eyes. Nechama was always asking, "What's the question?" because often it wasn't explicit. In many cases you might understand the answer very differently once you had figured out the question, because many generations had studied these interpretations, often without even asking what questions were being answered. From there we'd go on to ask our own questions of the text, and often the students would come up with their own answers. This was never articulated, but the message was an exhilarating one—that once we learned to read the text closely and ask questions, we too might have something to contribute. Nechama had a way of making students feel that this material wasn't dry and dusty, that it was malleable.

*Was Nechama Leibowitz well-known even then?*

In Israel, but not beyond. Her *gilyonot* [worksheets], which became the basis of her books, were not known in the U.S. Once she told us a

story about the moment she decided she wanted to be a teacher. She grew up in Germany, and one day, when she was fourteen, the teacher pulled down a map of Hungary, whereupon Nechama's best friend leaned over and whispered, "This is exactly what's been missing from my life." It was then, she told us, through that sarcastic quip, that she understood that students need to be motivated in order to learn. Later on, when I sat and prepared my lesson plans, I tried to keep that story in mind. Like every great teacher, Nechama wanted to instill a thirst for learning, not just for the material.

I was so taken with her that when the time came to come home, I wanted to take a year off from Brooklyn College, where I was a junior, just to study with Nechama. My parents wanted me to come back to finish college, and, not being terribly independent, I listened to them. But I knew that if I were a boy, and Nechama had been my rebbe, they would have encouraged me to stay.

*Are you still in touch with her?*

I try to see her every time I'm in Israel. She's now in her nineties, and still teaching out of her home. She loves to criticize America and American Jews. In all these years, she has never set foot outside of Israel—not even for a single day, and despite many invitations. We've had some arguments, too. For one thing, she's totally antagonistic to feminism. For another, she believes I made too big a fuss about Shabbat in *How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household*. Too elaborate, she believes. Her own approach is spartan—"wine, challah, a piece of chicken, what do you need flowers for?" I wonder if she sings *zmiros*, but I don't have the nerve to ask.

*Has she ever married or had a family?*

She married her uncle, who was blind, and she took care of him her whole life. She never had children, although in a way I suppose she's had thousands of children. She has always lived in the same modest apartment, two flights up. You walk past the minuscule kitchen, and past her bedroom, which is basically a curtain over an alcove. The living room is lined top to bottom with bookshelves, her desk, and a handful of folding chairs. The apartment is totally brown—in fact, everything she owns is brown, except for the occasional white blouse. It's odd, because this woman is so full of life.

*Have you had any other especially significant teachers over the years?*

I've had many, in different areas. In Jewish texts, I'd say my father

and my husband. I'd also single out Rabbi Meyer Feldblum, who taught at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University. In the late 1960s, I joined his class on rabbinic literature.

*When you say "rabbinic literature," do you mean Midrash?*

It was Talmud, but they wouldn't call it that because this was graduate school, not yeshiva. I had never studied Talmud before, and today I look back and wonder if it wasn't an act of chutzpah on my part to join a group of rabbis and rabbinical students who had all studied Talmud for years. Feldblum treated me kindly, but without deference. Although he was a deeply faithful and religious man, he wasn't allowed to teach in the rabbinical school. He was teaching—and this was an eye-opener for me—that contrary to the accepted wisdom that the Talmud was completed in the year 499, it included some material from later generations.

*So Feldblum was a critical scholar?*

He had an historical approach, and to some extent he was challenging what I now think of as the Talmud-from-Sinai theology. Even so, it took me a while to appreciate the class. It met on Tuesday nights, and when Yitz picked me up afterward, I'd be totally frustrated. Feldblum would talk about Rav Huna and the idea of the *asmakhta*, and for a while I just didn't get it. The *asmakhta*, which was supposed to be a link to a new interpretation, was, in the examples we looked at, so far-fetched that it felt like water slipping through your fingers.

*I have to interrupt you for a definition of asmakhta. Does it come from the verb lismokh—to rely on?*

Yes, it's a scriptural passage or word that appears to back up a novel interpretation.

*I've now checked the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, which defines the asmakhta as "the use of a biblical text as a 'support' for a halakhah without suggesting that the halakhah is thus actually derived from this exegesis."*

Wow, that's it exactly. And that's precisely what I missed until the whole system clicked in for me a few weeks later. Rav Huna was trying to re-interpret the tradition in a way that would meet a new reality, a new understanding of those times. But in order not to make it seem like an unseemly innovation, he found various scriptural pegs. The logic of the *asmakhta* wasn't the issue at all, and when I understood that, it was a defining

moment for me. For it's precisely this kind of enterprise that has kept Sinai close to us after all these centuries.

*So you were understanding something important about the rabbinic process.*

Yes, and how vital that process was to my own faith. And while my feminism was still years away, I could understand the need to change and re-interpret in a way that was connected to a historical and religious past.

*Was it unusual for a woman to be part of Feldblum's class?*

I may have been the first woman in that particular course, but it didn't feel revolutionary. One evening Feldblum came to class after that morning's *Times* had featured a front-page story about how the [Conservative movement's] Rabbinical Assembly had just reaffirmed its previous ruling of counting women in the minyan. You have to remember that this was Yeshiva University, which hasn't always felt friendly toward the Seminary. Feldblum told a story about Reb Yid, who leaves the house in the morning to go to shul while his wife tends to their five noisy children, getting them dressed and feeding them breakfast. After shul, Reb Yid returns home, the house is quiet, he has his breakfast and goes off to work. After work the house is in an uproar again. He leaves for shul for minchah and maariv, and when he comes home for the night the house is quiet again.

And then Feldblum said: "So I ask you. What would happen if his wife had to go to the minyan?" There was a huge roar of laughter in the class.

*And were you laughing too?*

I was, yes, but in the middle of the laughter I stopped and asked myself: What am I laughing at?

*This was surely a moment you would return to later.*

Definitely, but even then I felt in some vague way that something was amiss here. That story had to be analyzed in a quieter moment, and by then it was no longer a joke. But at the time I certainly didn't see it as a story against me; I was part of the crowd. In fact, it would have come as a surprise to any student in that class that any part of that story might be offensive. Otherwise, Feldblum would never have told it.

*It's obviously significant that you were an Orthodox Jew long before you were a feminist.*

Yes, and I've always felt grateful for that, because a lot of the anti-family rhetoric of early feminism washed right over me. I was firmly anchored in family values, and I've never viewed the family as a place where women were oppressed. There was inequity, of course, but that's different from oppression.

*You wrote in your first book that you were influenced by Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique, which was published in 1963. But with five children born during the 1960s, how did you even have time to read it?*

I was pregnant with David, our second child, when Yitz came back from a trip and brought me the book. In 1974, when I became friendly with Betty Friedan, I used to joke with her that because I'm such a slow learner, I went on to have three more children after reading her book. She didn't like hearing that one bit, because she didn't want to be in any way associated with the declining Jewish birth rate.

*Are you saying that you came to feminism intellectually more than emotionally?*

Yes. Although I personally didn't feel oppressed, I concluded that things had to be different, that the message of equality was a just one, which somehow had to be bridged to traditional Judaism.

*But the language of oppression didn't speak to you.*

No, not really. I know I experienced isolated incidents of disenfranchisement and unfairness, but that happens in many aspects of life. I felt I was engaged in a wonderful enterprise, and I was enjoying every part of it. True, I once had the fantasy of lying down and blocking the door and telling my husband that he couldn't leave the house. He had just taken a new job as a congregational rabbi, and was gone all day and all evening. But I had a part-time career as a student and a college teacher, five incredible kids and I thought of myself as exceedingly fortunate.

But it wasn't Betty Friedan's book that made me a feminist. It was the first National Jewish Women's Conference at the McAlpin Hotel in New York in 1973. A few weeks earlier, two of the organizers, Arlene Agus and Toby Brandriss, came to our house on a Sunday evening to ask Yitz to be part of a panel of men, along with Rabbis Joe Polak, Saul Berman, and Steve Riskin, who seemed to constitute the far left of the Orthodox spectrum.

I was in and out of the conversation. At one point I went upstairs

to put our daughter Goody to bed, and when I tucked her in and we sang the Sh'ma, I used a new melody we had learned from a recording of the Israeli Hasidic music festival. I was about to leave the room when Goody said, "Now can we say the real Sh'ma?"

It was a cute line, and when I came downstairs I shared it with our guests. Then I said, jokingly, "Now you can see why it will be hard to get anywhere with your new-fangled ideas."

*You said "your" ideas?*

Yes, although I didn't intend any antagonism and they didn't take it that way.

*In retrospect, your response reminds me of the wicked son in the Hagadah who removes himself from the collective enterprise. You certainly didn't consider yourself to be part of this new enterprise.*

That's right, but it wasn't the source of any tension. We all laughed, and Arlene said, "How would you like to be one of our keynote speakers on Friday night?"

*But if you weren't in any sense a feminist, why did they ask you to speak at the conference?*

I don't know. They could have asked Rachel Adler, Paula Hyman, or Judith Hauptman. I didn't even call myself a feminist until several years later. It was an abrasive word in the Orthodox community, and even in mainstream America. I might have squirmed a little in certain situations, but I hadn't really given much thought to women's roles in the synagogue, or in Jewish history. I was reading the newspapers and becoming interested in equality for women, but I didn't yet relate any of this to my life as an Orthodox woman.

*And what was your response when they asked you to speak?*

I said yes immediately. In retrospect, I'm not sure why. It must have been *bashert* [destined]. I didn't know it yet, but I was being propelled toward the next stage of my life.

*After our last conversation, I asked Arlene Agus if she remembered why she had asked you to give a prominent address at this conference if you weren't a feminist. She came up with four reasons. First, she said, there weren't many Jewish feminists around, "and we were dealing with the world as it was." Second, you already had a public reputation, in part because you were the wife*

*of a prominent rabbi. That's an ironic credential for a feminist, but again, Arlene noted, this was more than twenty years ago. Third, and perhaps more important, it was no small matter for a woman to be studying Jewish texts at Yeshiva University. Finally, she said, "I thought of Blu as a potential feminist."*

Thanks for clearing that up! I remember waltzing in about twenty minutes before Shabbat expecting to find about two or three dozen women. There were about five hundred. I often wonder how I embarked on public speaking with no training and no female role models in my family. But I saw the ease with which Yitz did it, without any fear or anxiety. He made it seem so natural.

When I got up to speak at the conference, the podium was too high and I couldn't see over it. The hotel engineer came up to fix it, but he didn't succeed. Then two women came up to adjust it and it worked. I made some comment like, "Women can do anything," which received a huge round of applause. I knew then that it was a friendly audience, and not the antagonistic hard-core feminist crowd I had partially expected. These women really wanted to learn, and they were thirsting for more Jewish learning. There was a hard-core radical group who tried to blame everything on the patriarchs and the rabbis, but they were a minority. Most of these women loved Judaism and wanted to have a greater part in it.

*Did Yitz come with you?*

It's funny you should ask. Yitz had agreed to speak at the Sunday session, so he took a vacation Shabbat from the congregation and came to the conference with me. But when we arrived at the hotel, we were told that men were not welcome. That's how out-of-the-loop I was. But Shabbat was coming, so what could we do? Yitz sat at the back all weekend. Later, he told me that he finally understood what it was like to sit behind the mechitzah.

*Was this your first venture outside the non-Orthodox world?*

I'd had dialogues with Christians, but not with women from other segments of the Jewish spectrum. And now that I was forced to collect my thoughts about women and Judaism, I found I could no longer accept some of the defensive or apologetic attitudes that were prevalent in the Orthodox world. At the same time, my love for the tradition made me critical of some of feminism's charges. So I guess it wasn't surprising that when I finished speaking, half the audience gave me a standing ovation. Some of the more



strident feminists in the room resented my critique of feminism, and were uncomfortable with my upholding of the traditional values of motherhood. But in some ways my own talk was the least of it. On Friday night I davvened in my room because a women's service seemed *treif* to me. I wanted to be halakhically correct, even here.

*Maybe especially here.*

Yes, actually. But by Shabbos morning I thought it might seem rude if I didn't show up, so I went and sat in the back.

*Had you already davvened in your room?*

Yes. I went to the service and sat in the back, and what I heard was like a nightingale. Arlene Agus was reading Torah, and I found it totally discombobulating.

*In what way?*

In every way! My ears were popping and my eyes were bulging. It was intriguing, but that's too mild a word. It was mind-blowing. To see women doing things that I thought women *couldn't* do—that was amazing, mind-boggling, exhilarating, frightening, challenging, upsetting—a whole jumble of feelings. It was far more than I could deal with at the time.

I just sat there, looking and listening. Even if I had tried to davven, there was no way I could concentrate. Half an hour later two women came walking down the aisle and I remember thinking, Oh God, I hope they're not coming for me. It was my only genuine prayer of the morning! But they *were* coming for me, to ask me to take *Hagbah* [lifting of the Torah]. I thought, wait a minute, I'm an observer here, aren't I?

*So you were trapped between your identity and your sense of politeness?*

Exactly. It was good manners that propelled me to the bimah. In fact, it was the first time I had ever held a Torah. I had studied it practically all my life and even knew parts of it by heart from my yeshiva memorization days, but until then I had never actually looked into an open Torah scroll. Later, it struck me that I had probably had more hours of Jewish education and Jewish teaching than anyone at the conference. But when they called me up for Hagbah, my first response was, What exactly do I do now?

*But this was an entirely new situation for you.*

Even so, I should have known what was involved. I had never

understood, for example, that you have to bend your knees to lift the Torah up straight, or that you need a certain physical strength to be able to hold it up without dropping it. Until that moment I had only been on the observing end of these rituals. I hadn't realized that any other choice was even possible.

*And now, suddenly, you were seeing things very differently.*

Yes, and after that conference my life changed. *Hadassah* Magazine published my remarks, and I started speaking around the country. I also began to experience the first nibbles of hostility within the Orthodox community.

*What form did that hostility take?*

At first it was jokes, little friendly jokes, although I think I responded well by taking it all with equanimity. I'm glad I didn't use my energy trying to argue with my friends and my own community. One friend said to me, "Why are you doing this? We have enough on our plate, so don't do us any favors." I could understand her attitude, because part of me felt that way, too. And somebody else said, "Poor Yitz, with his wife causing all those problems."

A couple of years later I was invited to speak at the R.C.A. [Rabbinical Council of America, the organization of Orthodox rabbis]. Toward the end of my speech, several people walked in, and when I was finished they started in on me: that I was totally misguided, that I shouldn't be talking like this, and that I really wasn't any different than a Conservative Jew. This was a mixed group of rabbis and their wives, but it wasn't these reprimands that I minded so much. What moved me to tears was that after the session, after this barrage of criticism, a number of people came up to me and said quietly, "We agree with you. Keep up the good work." Their comments were well-intentioned, but to hear these things said only privately, while nobody had stood up to defend me while I was hung out to dry, that felt—

*Cowardly?*

Yes.

*Let's talk a little about prayer.*

I have an easier time with studying, because I'm a poor davvener and I'm not highly motivated. Basically, most Orthodox women do not davven. I would say that of the 300 women in my shul, 290 of them don't

crack the siddur from one Shabbos to the next. In fact there is an obligation for women to pray, although it's a lesser obligation. The problem is that for a variety of reasons, women have been conditioned out of a formal prayer response. The conditioning is very powerful.

*Have you tried daily davvening yourself?*

I am somewhat embarrassed about this because I know how important prayer is in terms of the way one sees the world, and one's self. I've had sporadic engagements with daily *tefillah* [prayer], and they've been satisfying, but short-lived. I don't have the discipline, whereas my husband, in thirty-seven years of marriage, has never missed three times a day. One of our family jokes is that when we have to get up early, say, to catch a plane, Yitz will set the alarm 35 minutes earlier. And I'll open my eyes, say the words *she-lo asani ish* [who did not make me a man] and go back to sleep.

*Do some parts of the siddur speak to you more than others?*

Sometimes on Shabbat morning I'll do a random davvening—open up the siddur, put my finger somewhere, and davven that particular *tefillah*, and it will speak to me.

*Sort of like the I Ching?*

I do think that davvening is a learning experience, just as learning is a davvening experience.

But basically, anything that has a melody and is sung by the congregation speaks to me, especially a Carlebach melody—those are my favorites. But if I had to choose particular prayers for content, *Ahavah Rabbah* is one of my favorites. Also, the earthy prayers that ask for things frontally, like *Birkat Ha-Hodesh* [blessings for the new month] and especially the prayer for the State of Israel. It's too bad that ArtScroll has put out all these siddurim without including it. It was composed by Agnon, whom the Orthodox consider to be a secularist. In the same vein, Lubavitchers won't sing *Hatikvah* because it was composed by a secularist. The prayer that really makes my eyes mist over is the *tefillah* for Tzahal [the Israel Defense Forces].

*I don't think I've ever seen it.*

After the Yom Kippur War, the Israeli rabbinate introduced it into the liturgy. Until recently, I thought it was more universal than it actually was. Since you asked, I've looked in a few siddurim around the house, and it

doesn't appear in most of them, although it's said in Israel all the time.

*Any other liturgical favorites?*

After reading Jon Levenson's book, *Sinai and Zion*, I have a new appreciation for the Sh'ma. Levenson analyzes it as a declaration of the covenant, so that every time you say the Sh'ma you are actually re-affirming the covenantal relationship.

Finally, I love the *brakhot* [blessings]. I once had a Catholic student who ran into me years after taking my course in Judaism. "I remember your class," she said. "You taught us that Jews recite a prayer after going to the bathroom." I thought to myself, *That's* what you remember from the course? Oy!

*Actually, though, she was on to something. Would you agree?*

Yes, she was. I love the way the *brakhot* elevate everything you're doing in your daily life, so that you don't take anything for granted and you're always aware of the Creator, and of the variety and the specialness of every little thing you do—like eating a plum, or putting on a brand new sweater.

*Has your theology changed much since you became a feminist?*

Yes, in both positive and negative ways. I'm less naive, but I'm also less pious in the sense that I feel less awe. It's not just feminism, of course. It's also my own growing and changing, and the fact that the *Sho'ah* has increasingly intruded into my relationship with God. Now when I open the siddur and say the words of praise to God, almost against my will, Holocaust questions automatically spring to mind. That never happened in my earlier days.

Feminism too entails asking questions about authority, about God's intentions, and about learning to question. But there are compensations—the exhilaration of what women are doing with liturgy and ritual, and of course learning, which has always been more of a spiritual enterprise for me than prayer is. Still, I know I'm not as reverent as I used to be.

I've also become more aware of how subjective the traditional interpretations have been. Over the years, commentators have spoken in God's name without owning up to how much they were projecting their own ideas and dispositions onto the sources. This realization has caused me some problems, and some people have accused me of saying that I don't sufficiently respect what the rabbis have said. That's not it at all. What seems

clear to me, however, is that where there's been a rabbinic will, there's been a halakhic way.

*Is that your own phrase?*

Yes, although I know it has caused a certain amount of misunderstanding and discomfort. But I believe it's true, more so than some Orthodox Jews may like to acknowledge.

*And does this phrase represent a problem for you?*

It may have been a bit sweeping, but I think this subjectivity is what keeps Judaism fresh and alive, and does great credit to the halakhic system. Even Soloveitchik, in his way, was open to this perspective. Although he glorified objectivity in halakhah, he also argued that halakhic man must be creative in the Torah and that he is master of the text.

*How do you feel about women moving into traditional men's roles in religious practice?*

Each issue is a little different, and it changes over time. The first time I saw a woman wearing a kippah, which was twenty years ago in the library at the Jewish Theological Seminary, it made me uncomfortable. Even today, it strikes me as essentially masculine. At the same time, I can now respect a woman who does it—which is several steps beyond the level of anxiety that I used to feel. I never thought that I could wear a tallis, and I don't. But I recently started wondering about the enveloping feeling it engenders. I've seen women wearing *talleisim* in various synagogues, and this may be something that will enter the Orthodox community in a few decades. For most of my life I've seen these things as men's accouterments, but I'm no longer uncomfortable with them.

*You're gone on record somewhere regarding the possibility of Orthodox women rabbis, but I don't know where, or exactly what you said.*

In the winter of 1984, I published an article in *Judaism*, "Will There be Orthodox Women Rabbis?" I outlined some of the halakhic issues and some of the attributes that make an individual qualified for the rabbinate, such as learning, personal piety, and a willingness to serve the community. I wrote about how horrified I was when the Reform movement ordained its first woman in 1973, because that went against halakhah—or so I thought. But I've changed over time. With great difficulty, I finally had to ask myself what was so terrible about a woman's existence that she could not perform a

wedding or officiate at a funeral? In fact, Jewish law permits *any* male Jew to perform these functions, so long as the proper procedures are followed. I wrote that I no longer considered the ordination of women to represent the crossing of an important divide, and I wondered aloud if such a thing might be halakhically possible, and a positive development.

*So you can imagine Orthodox women as congregational rabbis?*

That might come later. First, I imagine, women rabbis would serve as teachers, heads of yeshivot, or in positions of leadership within the secular Jewish organizations. But once the process was started, it might only be a matter of time. Some feminists think I'm too slow on this issue, but I believe that if you move too quickly you might fracture the community.

These days there are several institutions where women are studying halakhah and Jewish texts, and before too long this group will reach a critical mass. Orthodoxy's great strength lies in its love of learning, and now that the gates of learning have been thrown open to women, it seems to me that *smikhah* is a logical point along this line. Within a few years several dozen women will be qualified, and I can easily imagine that a few will actually do it.

*Do you think this will happen at Yeshiva University?*

Not necessarily. But most of these women are products of Yeshiva University institutions, so Y.U. is certainly providing the groundwork.

*And by the time this happens, will Orthodox women be counted in the minyan?*

I think that's farther off. I believe we'll see Orthodox women rabbis before we see women counted in an Orthodox minyan.

*After On Women and Judaism, you took on an enormous subject when you wrote a book on how to run a Jewish household. Now, suddenly, you were responsible for putting forward a more mainstream position, or so I imagine. Was that very difficult?*

The only difficult chapter for me was the one about prayer, because I wrote it feeling that it pertained mostly to the lives of men. But I loved writing that book. I would have preferred to call it *How to Live as a Jew*, but my publisher had a different idea.

*And judging by the fact that it's still in print after twelve years, he was probably right.*

Maybe, but who knows how many it would have sold with a jazzier title? The idea for the book came from Dan Green at Simon & Schuster, who spotted the *baal teshuvah* movement before most other people.

*In writing the second book, were you on some level making amends for the more feminist-oriented first one?*

I didn't see that at the time, but in retrospect, yes, I think so.

*Although in How to Run a Jewish Household you didn't take the standard Orthodox position against abortion.*

I was pro-choice, reluctantly and cautiously.

*Were there any repercussions within Orthodoxy?*

There are bookstores that won't sell either book. I once went to visit my cousin who was sitting shivah. She told me she'd had my first book on the table, and that another relative, who had come the previous day, said, "This book? You should *burn* this book." I had previously sent autographed copies to all my relatives. I've heard that my second book is used in the Lubavitch community, perhaps for new arrivals, but only after the chapter on Abortion and Birth Control has been excised. If so, I can live with that.

*Do you think you've been given a fair hearing in the Orthodox community?*

By and large, yes, though my friends don't think so. There have been attempts to boycott or isolate me, and I'm not invited all that often to speak in Orthodox shuls or organizations, but I'm actually pleasantly surprised at the degree of hearing I've gotten in the Orthodox world. Even the criticism is a sign of being heard. Besides, it's better to be infamous for standing up for what you believe than be a total shmendrik.

*And in the feminist world?*

There, too. A few years ago, when I argued that there's something special about the relationship between mothers and children, and that women might not want to give that up so quickly—that biology *does* matter, in other words—that didn't go over too well with some feminists. But it's less controversial today, with the pendulum swinging back.

My categories used to be much more rigid, but I now see there are greater possibilities for women to assume roles that once belonged to men. At

the same time, I believe there's a growing acceptance among women that we can have distinctive roles without necessarily having inequity. I once discussed this with Cynthia Ozick, who maintained that "separate but equal" is simply not feasible. I disagree, just as I believe that the *mechitzah* has certain advantages. But you also have to acknowledge its potential for putting women down. Myself, I prefer the phrase "distinctive but equal."

*Do you think feminism is strengthening Judaism, or weakening it?*

Both. Whenever you begin to critique a system of authority, there's an inevitable weakening of the Commanding Voice. When some of the givens are challenged, whether it's through renewal or reinterpretation, there's a certain weakening of the fabric. We also have to acknowledge that feminism is one more divisive factor within the various denominations, and also within the larger Jewish community because of the effect of women's new independence on divorce and on the birth rate. This is an argument I've had with some feminist friends, who ask, "Why blame feminism for divorce?" But I see the picture not only through a feminist lens, but through a long view of Jewish history as well. And a sharp rise in the divorce rate and a drop in the birth rate are simply not good for the Jews.

Having said all that, I believe that feminism strengthens Judaism more than it weakens it. There is now much more learning in Jewish life, which certainly strengthens the community. The same applies to prayer, ritual, rites of passage, and celebration. For women, part of the exhilaration is the newness of it all. But men's ritual lives are enhanced, too, because ritual is something we share with family and community. And families built on equality are sturdier and happier. Feminism also strengthens Judaism because feminism is about justice, and incorporating a new measure of justice brings Judaism up to its own best level.

*Strengthening Judaism is, of course, one of the goals of your husband's organization, Clal.*

Yes, and also strengthening Jews to be more knowledgeable, more committed to the community and Israel, and more connected to one another across denominational lines. Surprisingly, it's the latter that has been the most difficult to bring about.

*Back to feminism. Where do you stand on the recent attempts to feminize the language of prayer?*

Thank God I don't have to deal with this one in the Orthodox community, where all such changes are seen as offensive. But here, too, I'm changing. A decade ago I dismissed this issue as something ephemeral, which moreover violated the sanctity of the inherited tradition. But over the years I've been sensitized to this issue by feminists within other Jewish denominations, and by Christian feminists as well. I've come increasingly to understand how problematic some of the traditional language is.

Although this idea still finds no quarter within Orthodoxy, I believe it will have to be raised. Through other feminists I've come to understand how powerful language is in shaping our values. It affects the psyche in ways we're not even aware of. I applaud the efforts that are going on in the other denominations, but I myself could never substitute, for example, for *Barukh Atah*. At least not now.

*Is there any part of the liturgy that you, as a woman, find especially jarring?*

I never used to find it jarring at all, but now I'm aware of the language all the time. Even as I say the words *Barukh Atah*, some part of me is aware that these words have been sanctified by millions of Jews through the generations, while another part of me understands that this language is also shaping attitudes—although that happens subliminally. I think Marcia Falk's brakhot are intriguing, and I can say them at a woman's conference, although I couldn't make that switch in my own davvening. I'm not prepared to disassociate myself from my community. With regard to language, I'd love to stay around for another generation just to see where all this will go.

*You belong to a women's tefillah group, the first such group to meet in an Orthodox shul, I believe. Have there been linguistic changes in your group?*

Hardly. For example, we don't even include the matriarchs in the Amidah. But when somebody is called to the Torah, the names of both parents are mentioned.

*Are you being critical of your group?*

No, I've been with the group for fifteen years and my experience has been very positive. It turns out you can be self-consciously aware and spiritually uplifted at the same time. You wouldn't think that's possible, but it is. It took our group about ten years to get to the point where we had a

critical mass, the beginnings of a "community hum." But we're beginning to sound like a shul.

*What's your view of women's life-cycle ceremonies?*

Within Orthodoxy there is the Simchat Bat, and I wouldn't be surprised if in another generation or two a Simchat Bat will be so routine that people will assume it was mandated at Sinai. Women outside the Orthodox community are creating ceremonies for giving birth, for nursing, for miscarriages, and other experiences. I think these rituals are long overdue, and that they enrich the whole community. Eventually these ceremonies will reach Orthodoxy just as bat mitzvah did.

*In fact, the Orthodox bat mitzvah, which is admittedly a rather modest event when compared with its masculine equivalent, has become quite common in recent years.*

Yes, although I can remember a time when a bat mitzvah was equivalent to announcing that you were Reform. The total awareness of bat mitzvah in Orthodoxy when I was growing up was that now you had to fully observe the fast days—and not just for the challenge of it. It meant that you were now performing mitzvot out of obligation. There was no celebration for girls, and if anything, when my friends and I looked at boys and their bar mitzvahs, we were relieved that we didn't have to go through anything as public as that.

But things change, even in Orthodoxy. When non-dairy margarine first came out, you were expected to serve it on a special plate marked "parve." And when women started to speak at their own wedding ceremonies, which was never done previously at Orthodox weddings, the rabbis used to say, "And now, the ceremony having been completed, the bride would like to say a few words." That's not something you hear very often anymore.

*William Novak, the former editor of Response and New Traditions, has interviewed Richard Israel, Moshe Waldoks, and Arthur Green in previous issues of Kerem.*