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History of Jewish Education in America

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## **Contributing to the Field:**

### **Addressing the Topic: Gender in Education**

The foreword of the recently URJ Press published book *The Gender Gap: A Congregational Guide for Beginning the Conversation about Men's Involvement in Synagogue Life* asserts that there is a crisis in the Reform Movement regarding men's involvement. The question of the role of boys and men in the movement was echoed at the recently held Gender and Jewish Education Symposium immediately preceding the December 2007 URJ Biennial in San Diego. Conversations about where the boys are in youth groups and rabbinical school have permeated the highest levels of power. And yet, I'm not sure I am ready to drink the kool aid about the alleged crisis.

In this article I will analyze some of the historical factors that have shaped the gendering of education today. Recognizing and reflecting the history, I will then discuss the recent Gender symposium, exploring some of the key themes and issues. Finally I will offer some analysis of the situation as a whole and offer some advice for the future.

#### **A Brief Summary of Key Elements of the History of**

#### **Judaism, Education and Gender in America**

Historically Judaism has been dominated by men. The Rabbis of the Talmud shaped the Judaism that has prevailed until today. Clergy were solely male and all communal and individual decisions were deferred to the clergy. As Jews immigrated to the United States, the

historic models of patriarchal Judaism persisted. The early teachers and leaders of Judaism were universally male. Early in American Jewish history, the instructors of Judaism privately tutored in homes, primarily to young men. Later *Cheders* and *Talmud Torahs* emerged, still dominated by men.

When women did emerge on the scene, namely Rebecca Gratz, the founder of the first Hebrew Sunday School and Jewish Orphanage, they still did not have the power or influence of men. Gratz believed that women were uniquely responsible for ensuring the preservation of Jewish life in America<sup>1</sup>. Historian Dianne Ashton writes that Gratz's organizations provided "Jewish women and children a way to be both fully Jewish and fully American"<sup>2</sup>. But yet, much like Golda Meir in Israel, who was always held up as the proof that women had equality in the Jewish State, Gratz has been exalted as providing the impetus for women to re-gender Jewish education as female. While women trickled into leadership roles in the Jewish community, the key leaders continued to be solely male. Social service organizations such as philanthropic groups saw women rise to positions of leadership, but often women had their own segregated organizations, rather than serving fully with men. While Gratz made tremendous contributions to education and philanthropy in America, she did not re-gender the field as a female domain.

A key historical figure in Jewish Education was Samson Benderly, the ideological father of a group of Jewish educators often referred to as the Benderly Boys. These early 20<sup>th</sup> century educational leaders balanced progressive views of education with a strong commitment to Judaism. Educated at both Columbia Teacher's College, studying under John Dewey, and at the Jewish Theological Society with Mordecai Kaplan, the Benderly Boys

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<sup>1</sup> <http://jwa.org/exhibits/wov/gratz/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://jwa.org/exhibits/wov/gratz/rg16.html>

sought to create Jewish Education within an American realm. Early in his career, Benderly taught girls and the poor, those considered on the fringes of society. But while Benderly trained women to be teachers, he trained men to be leaders. When Benderly was the Director of the New York Board of Jewish Education, he began to cultivate a cadre of young men to lead the Jewish world, including Emanuel Gamoran who was the Director of Education of the Reform movement, a position he served from 1923-1958. While the young women Benderly trained early in his career made an impact in their home communities, at least before they married, the young men Benderly guided were able to make a tremendous impact on Judaism on a larger and even national level.

This difference between the workers (teachers) and the movers and shakers (leaders) still prevails today. While women may not be forced to leave work outside the home once they marry, there are still limitations placed on them by the “glass ceiling” in the work world and the so-called “stained-glass ceiling” in synagogues. Women may dominate in the classrooms of religious schools, where they tend to be underpaid and overworked; however, men predominantly still lead major congregations and institutions. This is only slowly beginning to change. At the New York campus of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, women significantly outnumber men in the School of Education. As religious school work and education in general has been “feminized” the importance of the work and its’ pay have diminished. This creates a detrimental cycle of poor pay and low recognition. This is a cycle we have seen in medicine with regard to the nursing profession and in academia with elementary and increasingly high school teachers. While there are additional obstacles for Jewish education and Jewish Educators in the United States, gender and the historical

phenomena surrounding it have impacted the Jewish community and resulted in the current reality.

### A Brief Analysis of The URJ Biennial Symposium on Gender and Education

Co-sponsored by the National Association of Temple Educators (NATE), the Union for Reform Judaism Department of Lifelong Learning, the Union for Reform Judaism Youth Division and the Women of Reform Judaism and the Men of Reform Judaism, the symposium brought together Educators, Rabbis, Cantors, lay leaders and organizational leaders from across North America. The Symposium created a forum for discussion and a starting point for a consciousness of gender within Jewish Education.

One of the presentations at the Symposium that reflect what one could consider a more dated understanding of gender in general and of the issues surrounding men in the synagogue in particular was by Doug Barden, who is the Executive Director of the Men of Reform Judaism. Barden shared his thoughts, similar to what he asserted in the foreword of *The Gender Gap* about what he sees as the crisis facing men in the Reform movement, namely their lack of participation. He suggests that within Reform Judaism we have successfully increased female participation and now need to focus on men. He noted a number of impediments for men's participation in synagogue life including that he believes that they are afraid of displaying a lack of knowledge. He suggested that programs that are more likely to draw men in are short-term courses and programs that can be attended with their spouses. Barden offered a some-what dated analysis both of who our learners are and the dynamics within heterosexual marriages. There is an impending generational shift which will begin when recent graduates and the students who are currently in our seminaries and graduate schools begin to help create transformative change within the Jewish world.

One of these leaders is recently HUC-JIR ordained Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla who spoke passionately in a session entitled “Jewish Learning for Men, Women, and Everybody Else.” Rabbi Kukla taught about the importance of not making gender the most defining factor of an individual. While much of the Symposium had made certain assumptions about the nature of gender and its’ role in the lives of people, Rabbi Kukla reminded the participants that gender is socially constructed rather than biological. Additionally, we can understand gender as a spectrum rather than a rigid binary of male and female. Through exploring the notion of the *tum tum* in classic text, he explained that our traditional texts not only support the existence of gender diversity but also instruct us to be welcoming of everyone. A take-home message was that if we begin to think outside of “male and female,” we allow our students and families to explore their fullest human potential in a safe educational place. By transforming the conversation to a more advanced level, challenging the very assumptions of gender and pushing to create new dialogue, Rabbi Kukla is helping transform the Jewish world. Rabbi Kukla also spoke in another workshop, “Room to Grow: LGBT Affirming Jewish Classrooms” with Gregg Drinkwater, the Executive Director of Jewish Mosaic: The National Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity, where they offered a call to action to “integrate LGBT inclusion and awareness from challah baking to holidays to Hebrew” in Jewish Education. An integrated approach to inclusion for LGBT people as well as for gender will help transform Jewish education in the coming years to make it more dynamic and engaging.

One of the key questions in the “where are the boys” discussion is if there is a difference in numbers between the different movements. In a final presentation, Steven Cohen, Research Professor of Jewish Social Policy at HUC-JIR, presented data that shows a

gender gap between women and men in certain areas of religious behavior and attitudes. The results show that Orthodox Jews have only a slight gender gap, if at all, while among non-Orthodox Jews, non-married Jews have the greatest gender gap. His findings suggested that non-married Jewish women are significantly more involved than non-married Jewish men in Jewish communal institutions. In-married and mixed-married non-Orthodox Jews have comparable results in terms of a gender gap with women more involved than men. The area of greatest difference between males and females is with regard to spirituality. Cohen asserted that women are significantly more spiritual than men. Furthermore, women also attach greater importance to being Jewish, religiosity, and cultural pursuits than men. This presentation was able to take the previous anecdotal evidence presented by speakers and participants and offer it in a more statistical framework. If what Cohen says is true and women are the bearers of religion in a liberal community, is it then upon Jewish educators to utilize this reality and educate women in new ways or is their duty to try to change this reality to make men more engaged with religion? Is that possible?

### Suggestions for Improvement

There are a number of opportunities for improvement when it comes to gender and Jewish education. I will focus on two potential areas for growth. Deborah Meyer spoke about the idea behind the popular program *Rosh Chodesh: It's a Girl Thing* and how it was designed to empower adolescent women. It uses the principles of "Positive Youth Development." After the success of this program and recognizing the unique needs of Jewish young men, she and the organization "Moving Traditions" are starting to look at how to provide a parallel program for adolescent men which they are calling "The Campaign for

Jewish Boys.” Reflecting my ideology as a third-wave feminist, I see single-gender programming as a positive educational opportunity. The single gender programs such as *Rosh Chodesh: It’s a Girl Thing* and its soon-to-be-created male component are an opportunity to reach out to young people who are in a time of transformation and provide them with mentorship and support. We should not be scared away from single-gender programming, but should make sure that it doesn’t rely on gender-normative assumptions or not provide equal access. A cooking program for female students while the boys study with the Rabbi is as unacceptable as having female students engaged in dynamic programming while there is nothing offered for boys. I look forward to seeing single-gender programming expand as more programs are created.

A second important area of potential growth related to gender and Jewish education is in exploring our own history. Jewish ritual is based around the retelling of our history, including the directive to retell the story of the Exodus from Egypt to each generation. For much of our history, Jewish women’s experiences have been made invisible by the sheer silence. The Jewish and secular academic world today is blessed with a number of scholars and organizations that are increasing our knowledge about our Jewish past and particularly the past of Jewish women.

The Biennial Symposium conference began with a lecture by Dr. Gail Twersky Reimer entitled “Male and Female, God Created Them: Bridging the Gender Divide”. Dr. Reimer spoke about changing our understanding of history and using it as a way to bring women’s voices into our understanding of Judaism. She shared a clip from the Jewish Women’s Archive’s documentary called “Making Trouble” that featured Gilda Radner, a Jewish comedienne, and showcased the unique Jewish voice that she brought to our society.

She made the point that Jewish men and women are the figures we relate to from Jewish history and what we are able to see in our history can shape our present experience.

In a presentation on Jewish women's history, educators discussed their role as history makers; what educators teach of history is what is remembered. When women's history was not taught, it was lost. As we increasingly gain a better understanding of Jewish women's history, through the important work of scholars like Hasia Diner, Joyce Antler, Paula Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore we must find ways to integrate their work into our larger curricula. Jewish women's history can not be a stand alone program, but rather an integrated part of every curriculum. How can one study Emanuel Gamoran and ignore the contribution of his educator and author wife Mamie? How can one discuss the changes that emerged in the Reform movement without recognizing the monumental nature of the ordination of Rabbi Sally Preisand? Through the impact of important institutions like the Jewish Women's Archive, we are constantly being offered new resources to teach with and learn from. It is upon educators to find ways to utilize them to engage both boys and girls.

### Conclusion and Final Reflection

As a young woman growing up at Temple Ohabei Shalom in Brookline, MA I had the opportunity to experience the leadership of Rabbi Emily Lipof, a dynamic woman who was a powerful leader. I count myself lucky; I am part of a generation of women who grew up never doubting that women can (and should) be rabbis. As I journeyed through Jewish Education, both formal and informal, I had the opportunity to experience powerful educational leadership from women and men. When I began Rabbinical school at HUC-JIR our class, which was in Israel 2004-2005, was disproportionately female. While my classmates would awkwardly acknowledge the imbalance with a nervous giggle, I would

confidently explain that we were still making up for 2,000 years without women as rabbis and a couple more in a Rabbinical school class was not a problem.

Yes, there is a lingering question about where boys and men are in our community. There need to be continued conversations about how we are reaching out to men and boys. But we cannot compromise the advancements women have made. And we cannot apologize for success. We have 2,000 years of imbalance to overcome and there are lots of bimahs, executive boards and meeting tables still without women. We need to be proud of how far we have come and to continue to push for further opportunities for women the Jewish community and to explore ways to further involve men. While I may not be driving the kool aid of a male population in crisis, I am aware that we have a lot of work to ensure that both girls and boys, men and women are included in the *ohel* of Jewish Education.