

A Brief Position Paper on the Ordination of Women

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What is it that we wish to renew? Is it Judaism, ossified after centuries of enforced isolation, or is it Americanism, grown fat and self-indulgent after decades of untrammelled growth?

And how shall renewal be wrought? Shall we take the neoclassical stance of the Mitnagdim and uphold the old values of Torah and discipline; shall we, like the Hasidim, perpetrate a "creative betrayal" of an earlier tradition by reappropriating its vocabulary, dress, code, stories, and songs; or shall we engage in the subversive tactics of the Haskalah?

In our day, Orthodoxy, be it in the guise of Lubavitsh, Gush Emunim, or Lincoln Square, is making a comeback by exploiting a sense of apocalypse, of the Decline of the West, our fear of the chaos that reigns in the political and moral spheres. We return to strict segregation, ritualism, an image of preindustrial society, *Gemeinschaft*, and unabashed Jewish patriotism to demonstrate our rejection of the modern world.

At the other extreme is Jewish secularism, which has so clearly played itself out that it is fitting for Irving Howe and others to wax eloquent over it. Things have gotten so bad that hardly anyone will own up to being a cosmopolitan anymore.

Which leaves us with the strategy of "creative betrayal," a term coined by Gershon Shaked to designate the free adaptation of the classics into Hebrew. It is very much an ongoing process. Just as Hasidism reshaped Lurianic Kabbalah in its own image, so Peretz, Berdichevsky, Buber, Wiesel, and Havurat Shalom reshaped Hasidism in their own image. What makes this approach so Jewish is that it seeks to legitimate the new in the name of the old. It is the dialectical tension out of which Conservative Judaism was born and continues to thrive.

Creative betrayal is essentially midrashic, for it tries to relate the unrelated, to reconcile irreconcilables. Feminism and Judaism are two such polarities. The time has come to mediate between them, and of all the movements in Jewry, ours, I think, is uniquely equipped for the task.

If we adopt a non-apocalyptic view of the world, and if we assume, as I do, that on the specific issue of women, it is Judaism that has been lax and unresponsive while Feminism has unleashed a vast reservoir of creativity and commitment, then what follows is a creative betrayal of tradition in the name of this new and vital force. If we believe, furthermore, that the Synagogue, not the golf course, not the community center or the B'nai B'rith lodge, is the dynamic

focus of Jewish life, then the Synagogue must be an arena for women to assume leadership positions. To channel this energy into the pulpit rabbinate is not to subvert Judaism but to Judaize Feminism.

Bra-burnings are a thing of the past. The movement as a whole is now concerned with ERA* and other complex legal, educational, and essentially *constructive* tasks. The women contemplating the Conservative rabbinate are deeply committed to *Halakhah* and Jewish learning. They come with a new sensitivity, a new perspective, perhaps even a new language with which to reinterpret the Jewish experience. To dress this exotic creature in a *tallit* and *tefillin* and to place her on the pulpit is to my mind as potentially exciting a role model as Maimonides' rabbi-as-philosopher and the Baal Shem Tov's rabbi-as-zaddik.

Creative betrayal is an ongoing process. It is undertaken by those who believe that a living tradition must be violable to be viable.

*Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.