

Mary Gendler

I am a woman. I am a Jew. I am a Jewish woman. I am both and I want to be both. I have only one problem. I am not quite certain what it means to be a woman: I am equally unclear about what it means to be a Jew. That leaves me especially puzzled about what it means to be a Jewish woman. This may sound flippant, but the question causes me much conflict. For I have, on the one hand, the traditional view of woman, and especially Jewish woman, and on the other hand inner thrusts which take me far from this image. How am I to reconcile the two? Can I be "liberated" and still be a "woman"? Can I be "emancipated" and still be "Jewish"? But let me be more specific.

Since the triumph of the patriarchy, thousands of years ago, women have been unmistakably second-class citizens in almost every tribe and country and culture. Simone de Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex* (New York, 1952), traces brilliantly and in depth the historical development of the role of women, a feat which I will not attempt here. Certain highlights, however, might prove helpful in elucidating my dilemma. Except for a few places in the ancient world, women, at least in the Western and Near Eastern countries, have until quite recently been regarded as weak, inferior beings. (I do not wish to consider the Far East or places like Africa because I know almost nothing about their cultures.) That this is so is evident from even a cursory glance at the laws and social customs in the various cultures. Women, deprived of legal, social and spiritual rights, have been forced to undergo such indignities as polygamy, harems, confinement to the home, veils over their faces, exclusion from education and training other than homemaking, lack of legal recourse, etc. etc. And, in general, women have accepted this inferior position. (Why they have done so is a good and fair question. I do not know the answer, but I do not believe that it is possible to oppress without some measure of acceptance from the oppressed, certainly in this sort of relationship.) And even when they have not been forced to suffer *great* indignities such as the ones just mentioned, they have accepted legal and social arrangements which locked them in the home and granted them the privileges and status of pampered and not so pampered children. This pattern, of course, has and is still changing a great deal. But although in most Western countries the legal and social opportunities for women are theoretically the same as those for men custom and psychological barriers are very difficult to break down.)

It is often argued that, despite the discrimination, there have been outstanding women throughout history who have broken through these huge barriers and prejudices to attain unusual accomplishments. I do not deny this, but I reject this particular argument for women on the same grounds that I reject it for Blacks or for any other oppressed group. Why should we (or they) have to overcome unnatural hurdles? What would happen if we all really competed equally? Why have such a disproportionate number of men been the political leaders, artists, musicians, philosophers, poets, etc.? Women, to state the

Emanuel Forman

1. THOU shalt not grant any posthumous victories unto Hitler."* Dr. Fackenheim has, in this way, pointed to what he calls the "614th commandment" given in our time. I would agree with that description, but even more so. For me, personally, to have lived in this particular era is to have experienced *all* the commandments as having been given once again. It is precisely this "614th commandment" which has, as it were, infused the other 613 with a new dimension of urgency. The entire tradition seems to have a new claim upon me. No longer do I feel compelled to discover or uncover the "reasons for the mitzvot" as I did before. No longer do I feel the need to justify the commandments in the light of contemporary science, psychology, sociology, etc. No longer do I feel obligated to search for "relevance." Nay, because of these "epoch making" events, I now personally sense that each Jewish observance of which I am capable is a kind of religious response to those very events. Each one represents another "no" to Hitler. Each of them, in turn, has become a contemporary *act of faith*, in and of itself.

2. Because of these particular events, I can no longer view Jewish birth as "accidental." I now recognize my birth as a Jew to be the result of (a) an intentional act of will on the part of countless generations before me who could have, but did not, "opt out" of their Jewishness; and (b) the survival of my own parents at a time when millions of others did not. Both of the above, therefore, have invested my birth as a Jew with a "mitzvah" quality all its own, a quality which has shaped my very existence as a person and the way in which I view myself as a person. I cannot, therefore, disassociate my human self from my Jewish self. The two, of necessity, are one and the same.

*For an elaboration of Fackenheim's thoughts on this matter, see the introduction to his *Quest for Past and Future*. — ed.



obvious, comprise fifty per cent of the population, but nowhere near fifty per cent of its creative geniuses. From this we could conclude one of several things: women really *are* inferior to men and here is the very proof (which I reject); women's creativity is fully encompassed by and expressed in child bearing and rearing (which I also reject); something has happened historically in the cultural arrangements of societies which has prevented women from fully developing and realizing their potential.

Here I would like to interject an important cautionary note. I do *not* feel that women and men are or should be the same. We certainly are not the same biologically. To state the obvious: men are, in general, physically stronger and therefore able to do certain kinds of work which is very difficult for women. Only women, on the other hand, are able to bear and give suck to children. Thus, to a certain extent, our roles *are* biologically determined. But men have never been limited to nor bound solely by their biology. Their intellect and imagination have enabled them to leap and thrust into new beginnings, constantly enlarging the boundaries of their world and their experience. The most recent example of this is the penetration into space which defied all bonds of gravity and opened the possibility of almost limitless reshaping. (This restlessness may, of course, lead to the extinction of us all, and it may be that what man needs is a renewed sense of the wonder of the earth more than conquering new worlds.) Women, it is true, have benefited from these advances but with few exceptions (Marie Curie comes immediately to mind), they have remained much more closely bound to their biological destiny than have men. In saying this I would like to emphasize that I am *not* denying the worth and dignity of childrearing and homemaking. I feel, however, that it is an unfair limitation when the woman is so overburdened with these physical aspects of life that she has no opportunity to push towards the kind of intellectual and spiritual transcendence which has enabled men, for better or for worse, to shape History. The male, on the other hand, by moving as far away as he can from biological demands, denies and is thus denied an opportunity to develop the softer side within himself. It is this softer, more passive, more rhythmic side of man which, recognized and cultivated, might add a measure of humanness often sorely lacking in his dealings with the world. For men, in their mad desire to control everything about them, have lost touch with the intimacies of birth and growth; they have lost the sense of the incredible fragility and preciousness of life which women, through nurturing their children, experience daily. The effects on the world of this polarization of roles have been devastating!

* * * *

And what of the Jewish woman? How does she fit into this overview of women in History? Unfortunately, her fate has been no better than that of her Christian and Moslem sisters. Jewish law reduces her to the level of a child or servant. For example: she is not a valid witness in legal proceedings; she cannot initiate divorce proceedings, but must be "granted" a divorce by her husband. If he disappears, refuses, or goes insane, she has no recourse and may never remarry. Custom reflects this basic attitude toward women. Socially and

religiously she was never the equal of men. For many centuries she was not sent to school, and this in the midst of a culture which valued education very highly. She is not counted in the minyon. She cannot officiate at a service or read the Torah. For that matter, she is not even permitted to sit among the men in the synagogue. (It is as if the men were afraid that women would distract them from the more serious matters of prayer and the soul. This seems to say that they [women] were regarded solely as "body". Their removal to a balcony frees the men's spirits of the fleshly temptation and thus permits its expansion or purification. But what of the woman's soul? Why was it not considered? Why not seat the men in the balcony?) She has no special garments for prayer. Indeed, she is really not expected to pray, and is excused from it because of her "home responsibilities". And when she does come to the synagogue, she sits and gossips in the balcony, thus confirming the male's suspicion that she is not inclined towards prayer anyway. (But why not gossip? Hidden in a balcony, excluded from any real participation in the service, what meaning could it have for her? Her gossip was merely a confirmation of her alienation.)

And so emerged the story-book picture image of the Jewish mama, face red from the heat of the stove, loading the creaking table with goodies for the men as they returned, bodies freshly scrubbed from the mikvah and souls washed clean by prayer in the femaleless schul. Their spirits refreshed, they were now ready to satisfy their bodies. But what of the woman's spirit? When was she given the opportunity to soar and delve into the outer and inner spaces? Burdened with many children and household duties, she profitted little from the Shabbat: she rarely received an opportunity for true renewal.

This, I believe, is an accurate portrait of the Jewish woman, at least until a hundred years ago. With the *advent* of the enlightenment in Europe and the subsequent freeing of Judaism from the rigid exigencies of orthodoxy, the woman's position, especially in Western Europe and North America, gradually improved somewhat. As industrialization and secularization proceeded in these countries, many found themselves forced to have much more interaction with the surrounding society than they had ever had before. Legislation making schooling compulsory for all children up to a certain age was the rule. And so, more and more Jewish girls went out into the world and discovered that its boundaries were broader than they had ever guessed. More and more they (as did their brothers, of course) began mixing with the "goyim" and learned that their girl friends had more freedom than they. One by one they started to rebel against the restrictions and burdens of a tradition which asked much of them and granted little in the way of true rewards in return. Kashrut, separate dishes for Pesach, festive meals for the many holidays—these things meshed less and less with the kind of lives they wanted to lead. Some, as did their brothers, rejected Judaism completely. Others chose to try to maintain some contact with it, and the tradition accommodated itself somewhat to the changing times and attitudes. And so women were, for example, gradually permitted to sit, first, downstairs on a special side in the synagogue and, finally, in Reform and most Conservative temples, to join the men. They gave up the sheitel and dressed in modern, stylish clothes. They mixed more and more with the outside world, received an education, and entered the professions.

In the final *analysis*, however, the Conservative and Liberal (European) movements have made shockingly few basic changes. Women are still not counted in a minyon, generally not called to the Torah, and rarely permitted to lead the service. The Reform tradition, to its credit, has eliminated these arbitrary distinctions between men and women, but even there unfair defacto distinctions remain. For although women are taking a more and more active role in the temples and synagogues, and although religious involvement plays a smaller and smaller part in the lives of non-orthodox men, the latter still retain most of the influential positions. For example, no woman, as far as I know, has yet been ordained a Rabbi (although this is possible in the Reform seminaries and may occur this year). There are no female Cantors. How many women have been president of their congregations?*

The other side of the question is, of course, why so few women have taken advantage of the opportunities available to them. And why have they not pressed harder for more change? The answer, for me personally, is tied up with the questions I posed at the beginning of the paper: what does it mean to be a woman, a Jew, a Jewish woman?

* * * *

In the first part of the paper I tried to give a general overview which might suggest what some of the answers to these questions have been in the past. Very briefly, being a woman meant submitting yourself first to the dictates of your father and then to those of your husband. The woman, in essence, "belonged" to the male. He may have adored and worshipped her (at best), but she served him. Being a Jew, if you were a male, meant an intense involvement with the laws and spiritual life of Judaism. But if you were a female, it meant exclusion from most of the spiritual aspects of the religion and bondage to the myriad legal taboos and restrictions.

Times, as I tried to indicate, have changed, but it is my contention that they have not changed enough. Inertia, custom, the natural inclination of little girls to follow in the paths of their mothers, the social ostracism which often accompanies attempts to break into new patterns, all these things press hard against the forces of change. We can see this within Judaism. Having been "excused" from prayer (public, community prayer, that is), we have become habituated not to think of ourselves as spiritual beings. And so it is that most of us, as was the case with our great-great-grandmothers, still never even dare to dream of becoming a rabbi ourselves, but sublimate any conscious or unconscious yearnings we might have in that direction into a desire to marry or to bear one. The result is a denial of a legitimate thrust which may lead to destructive vicarious living. This is not to say that I feel that all, or even most, rabbis should be women, rather it is to press for the option that this be psychologically and socially as well as legally available to those women who are so inclined.

I realize that the factors which enter into the rapid secularization of Jews in the United States are many and complex. I would not attempt to catalogue them

*Jane Snyder's mother is an exception. — ed.

here. I would like to suggest, however, that in so far as women have, in the past, been the principal bearers of Judaism to their children, the drift away from involvement in it may be a reflection of their conscious or unconscious rejection of a tradition which assigns them such an inferior status. (These inequalities are more likely to be visible to her now than two hundred years ago because she is more involved in the "outside" world and so can compare and contrast. Also, I am speaking here mainly of Conservative and Orthodox Judaism, less of Reform.) I feel that if women were not only permitted but encouraged to take a more active role in the service, to enter more power positions in the synagogue so that its direction could directly reflect their interests and thrusts; to enter seminaries, to develop their spiritual resources—then, perhaps, the tide away from the synagogues might begin to be stemmed. For women who feel themselves to be "really" a part of something at a very deep level would be more likely to communicate an enthusiasm for Judaism to their children. Perhaps an example from my own life would help to explain what I am saying.

As a modern woman, I am finding the old definitions of my role and status inadequate. I do not like being confined solely to mothering and nourishing, although I take great pleasure in both. I find that this aspect of myself must be balanced by enough time and freedom to permit other parts of me to grow. So, for example, I enjoy going to school, planning services for a house synagogue, writing papers and articles, reading books, picketing and petitioning, planting and tending a garden, talking with adults, listening to music, going to movies and theater, etc. etc. But for me to have the time to do these things requires rearrangements and adjustments within the home. Our two small children still need to be tended and the housework still has to be done. The process of change is, as I indicated earlier, slow and sometimes painful, but as my husband and I grapple with growth towards a new balance, we are both finding that each of us and the children are benefitting.

How does the re-evaluation of my role as a woman affect my life as Jew and Jewish woman? Formerly our religious life was very highly polarized. My husband is a Rabbi and had a congregation for a number of years. Thus, he was very involved in spiritual matters in a beautiful and inspiring way. I have never attended services which I enjoy more than "his". On the other hand, it was often difficult to enjoy the services because, first of all, I was frequently so tired from the holiday preparations that I almost fell asleep; secondly, because of the customs and stratifications of the synagogue as well as my own cultural conditioning, there was little opportunity for real participation in the service.

Many things have been changing for us in the last year. Since he no longer leads a congregation, the actual physical demands on my husband's time are much more flexible. This has given us an opportunity to experiment with new arrangements within the home. So, for example, we both prepare for holidays together. This means that we both participate in the cooking and cleaning, and from this we have found that many things follow almost automatically. First, I am no longer too exhausted at sundown to enjoy or participate in soul elevating experiences. Secondly, I feel considerably less resentment about doing the work now because we are doing it together, and work done "with" someone always has a different feel, for me anyway. This, in a strange way "frees" part of me,

Arthur Green

I was born in March, 1941. I have no direct memory of the war years and the holocaust. I have at times tried to fantasize what must have been going on somewhere in Europe at the time of my birth. But I have decided not to find out . . .

Of course I feel that I as a Jew am a product of the holocaust and the return to the land which have taken place during my lifetime. These are the backdrop events to all of our lives. Without them we never would have happened as Jews. Coming from an assimilated and largely secularist Jewish family, the fact that there was enough concern to expose me even minimally to Jewish education cannot be seen except as a reaction to those epoch-making times. To put it most directly: all those of us in America who are the products of the so-called "return to the synagogue" of the fifties would not exist as Jews were it not for our parents' collective reactions, both in shame and pride, to the holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel.

Backdrop. Yes, that's just what it is--and in some ways ironic backdrop at that. Even given the place of those events as motivation for our Jewish lives, how terribly well shielded we were from it all. What were we ever told about what it means to be a Jew in these times? Our parents understood so little, and our Jewish education was all hung up in "*ha-yeled yoshev al ha-kieset* . . ." How many American Jewish kids do I know who grew up in this era and only in June, 1967 found out about Jewish peoplehood? How many American Jewish kids who still (this being written as we await the fate of the Jewish prisoners in Amman) don't know that there's a Jewish people.

It happens that a number of the people I'm closest to were either born of refugee parents or came out of the D.P. camps right after the war. I guess I feel a special love for those people, for having come from there and emerged human but in some perverse way I also envy them; I envy their being right there at the center of Jewish historic consciousness. These are the last generation of international Jews, somewhere knowing so well who their people really is, knowing what it means to be a Jew in these times in a way that I will never understand, and knowing--no matter how deeply they become a part of this culture that they are in America only by chance.

I am an American. That means I have had to *discover* the holocaust. I grew up in a Jewish community that was in terrible flight from it. And having come of age in the sixties in America, the forces of work on me have pushed our great Jewish events into the background, to the point where I would say that (except for moments like June '67) my consciousness has to *choose* to focus on them. Everything that's happened in this decade has left a serious mark on my generation: Civil rights, non-violence, riots, assassinations, black nationalism, the war and the peace movement, psychedelics, the rise and demise of hippie identity, the deepening alienation of sensitive American kids from the fifties lifestyle in which we were raised--all these, to be honest, are the more direct setting within which we happen. And how much psychic room is left for events that impinge less directly?

If I look at the groups around RESPONSE and our Havurot, for example, I

for as he shares in my work, I am released to share in his. The provinces are no longer "mine" and "his". Thirdly, my husband is no longer isolated from participation in the physical preparation which provides a lovely setting for and accompaniment to the spiritual uplifting of the holidays. He, therefore, is more in touch with the "body" of the experience while I am freed to reach towards its "soul". Both of us gain immeasurably from this.

* * * * *

I insist on the right to be a woman, a Jew, and a Jewish woman. I will not relinquish my tradition, despite its rigidities, until I am absolutely convinced that no efforts can make it bend. But neither will I stand passively by while the Conservative and Orthodox movements continue to consider me a second-class citizen. Change is always hard, and the familiar is comfortable, even if it is unjust. It is especially difficult to relinquish power and privilege. But this must come within Judaism, I am convinced, or else the religious commitment of women, as well as of men, will continue to wither. Children whose religious involvement is solely outside the home seldom develop a deep feeling for it. But perhaps, just perhaps: if women become more conscious of their exclusion from certain aspects of religious life and press for change: if men will begin to exchange some of their power-in-the-world for some participation-in-the-home if men and women begin to develop a kind of sharing which will enable each to develop a generally neglected other-side of himself: perhaps this might just be the revitalizing spark which could rekindle the dimming light of religious commitment to Judaism.

