

Books



NATI SHOHAT / FLASH 90

Cosmetic feminism

Religious feminist women prefer to remain within the boundaries of what they consider acceptable in the marriage ritual and do not act as radically as they feel **By Haviva Ner-David**

THERE IS a revolution occurring in the modern-Orthodox Jewish world, and the pivotal axis of change of this revolution is the issue of the status of women. In her book, Irit Koren, a graduate of Bar-Ilan University, who researches and lectures widely on gender and Judaism, selects as a case in point women who are choosing to make changes in the Orthodox Jewish wedding ceremony to make it more egalitarian, yet still acceptable within their community's interpretation of *halakha* (Jewish law).

Dr. Koren's claim is that Orthodox feminists today represent a larger phenomenon of modern religious people who live in two

contradictory worlds – the traditional world of old and the progressive world of today – reconciling those two worlds through reinterpretation and/or pushing the boundaries of what is considered within the realm of acceptable in that community.

Koren interviewed a small select group of self-defined Orthodox women, who were struggling with the sexist traditional Jewish wedding ceremony. Koren discusses changes these women made in various parts of the traditional ceremony to adapt it to their modern feminist sensibilities; here, though, I will deal only with changes they made in the *kiddushin* (or ring) ceremony.

The traditional *kiddushin* ceremony is unilateral. Only the groom gives a ring to the bride; the bride does nothing, and is silent throughout. In this act of giving the ring and reciting the phrase: *Harei at mikudeshet li betabaat zu k'dat Moshe v'Yisrael* (You are hereby sanctified to me with this ring according to the religion of Moses and Israel), the groom is acquiring the bride and setting her exclusively aside for him sexually. After the ceremony, it is forbidden for the wife to have sexual relations with another man upon punishment of death (for her and the man), and any resulting children are considered *mamzerim* (children born as a

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result of adultery on the woman's part who are therefore forbidden to marry anyone but another *mamzer*).

If the husband, however, has children with another (unmarried) woman, those children are not considered *mamzerim*. In addition, the only way for the couple to divorce is for the man to willingly give his wife a writ of divorce, a *get*. In other words, the unilateral nature of the ceremony creates a power imbalance within the marriage itself.

KOREN'S INTERVIEWEES dealt with this feminist dilemma in a number of ways. One woman insisted on accepting the ring aloud so she would not have to stand silently beneath the wedding canopy like a china doll. This kind of change gives the bride a voice, though not an equal or active role. Another gave her groom a ring while reciting the line from the Song of Songs, "Set me as a seal upon thy heart, as a seal upon thine arm; for love is strong as death," which gave her a voice and gave the ceremony the appearance of being egalitarian. In reality, though, her act of giving the ring had no legal significance and therefore did nothing to alter the unequal power relationship.

Koren also looks at women who chose to take steps to make the power relationship more equal halakhically. One couple signed a pre-nuptial agreement, which stated that if one of them refused to give or accept a *get*, he or she would have to pay a certain amount each month until the refusal ceased. Koren and her husband themselves signed a document of "Conditions within the Marriage," which maintains the unilateral nature of the traditional ceremony but nullifies the marriage should one of the partners refuse to give or accept the *get*.

Interestingly, all of Koren's couples leave the ceremony in place while implementing additions that are either cosmetic or legal. This is fascinating, because some of the women she interviewed were quite radical in their thinking. However, they preferred to remain within the boundaries of what they (or their husbands to be, or their rabbis, or their parents, or their communities) considered acceptable, and did not act as radically as they felt.

For example, one of the "heroines" in the

book expressed feeling "insulted" by the traditional ceremony, and said that she felt it went against her entire being. If only she and women like her had the courage to act upon their principles and marry in a non-halakhic ceremony, she says, it would forge a path for many other women. Moreover, she felt that by succumbing to the act of perpetuating the unilateral *kiddushin* ceremony, even with whatever additions her groom and their rabbi would agree to, she was also sublimating her anger towards her future husband at his insistence that she succumb. I would further argue that by allowing her desire to remain within the Orthodox world trump her desire to be treated as an equal to her husband, she chooses to perpetuate the sexism inherent in Orthodoxy.

Perhaps they make this choice out of love for their partners, though it is noteworthy that their partners were not asked to prove their love by agreeing to marry in a non-halakhic ceremony. This illustrates something inherently sexist and uncompromising about the Orthodox world. While *halakha* can always bend and change over time, a traditional religious society can only change when there is an ideological shift in thinking – whether the change comes from "above" (the rabbis) or from "below" (the masses who influence the rabbis). These women must insist on an equal relationship based on equal respect and not let Orthodoxy trump feminism, otherwise equality will not exist in the Orthodox world.

Koren evokes a powerful image comparing these women to the girls in her Orthodox Israeli grade school, who played a game called "*goomi*" on the side during recess while the boys played soccer. The rules of *goomi* require the girls to stretch an elastic string in various directions while contorting their bodies into various positions to avoid breaking the elastic and therefore lose the game. At an early age, these girls were already taught how to play by the rules while stretching these rules as far as they could go without breaking. It is no wonder, then,

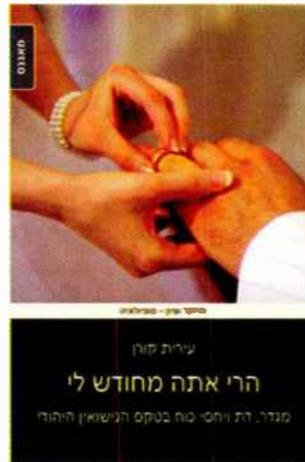
when these young women are marrying, they agree to stretch the elastic (push the boundaries) and contort themselves in order not to break the rules. It does not occur to these women to try to change the rules of the game or to play another game.

Perhaps Koren will consider writing a sequel to this book, in which she interviews couples who have decided to take the more radical path of opting for a totally egalitarian ceremony that is still very Jewish in feel and character. I do wonder, however, if Koren herself was not in some way overplaying the concept that Orthodox feminism is the indispensable tool of change in Jewish ritual.

She states that it is "religious" women rather than secular women who will create change because of their knowledge of Jewish law and their commitment to it. However, Koren fails to acknowledge that secular Israeli Jews are beginning to create their own Jewish rituals. Also, liberal religious couples are marrying in non-Orthodox yet religious ceremonies. They are based on *halakha*, but are egalitarian because they do away with the *kinyan* (acquisition) aspect of the ceremony. Such couples may or may not see themselves as part of the Orthodox community. However, these couples are doing just as much, if not more, to effect change in Jewish ritual as the women Koren interviewed.

In fact, without the more radical feminist and progressive changes being made in the non-Orthodox world, these Orthodox women would have had no models of change. Orthodox feminists may act as if their agenda was created in a vacuum, but I am aware, as a woman who grew up Orthodox and was quite active in the Orthodox feminist movement, until recently, that these ideas did not originate in the Orthodox movement.

Jewish women (and men), before the women interviewed in this book, have struggled as feminists with the traditional wedding ceremony, and have come up with solutions that address and remedy the issues of power imbalance in a more satisfying way than the cosmetic "Bandaid" approaches that these women take. ■



**You are Hereby Renewed
Unto Me: Gender,
Religion, and Power
Relations in the Jewish
Wedding Ritual**

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