

Women and Judaism

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It is helpful to consider contemporary Jewish feminism as developing in stages. The first stage, beginning in the early 1970's was focused on questions of equality, legitimacy, and equal access. Those were the heady years that first witnessed the ordination of women as rabbis and investment as cantors in the Reform and Reconstructionist movements. In the Conservative movement, women began to agitate for change, to be counted as part of a minyan, the minimum number of people required for public prayer. Parents experimented with covenant ceremonies for daughters, so that equality would start from the first moments of Jewish life and girls would be entered into the covenant in ways that paralleled the entrance of boys.

In the second phase, by the middle of the 1980's, the questions began to shift somewhat. While concern about equal access and equality remained, new questions emerged, focused on the nature of women's experience. Instead of asking about women's obligation for public prayer, these questions explored how women experienced prayer and God, how the entrance of women into all facets of Jewish life changes our perceptions of tradition, ritual and practice. Taking women's experience and contributions seriously challenges our ways of imagining God and of speaking toward God in liturgy and ceremony. An extraordinary flowering of Jewish feminist scholarship and creativity has expanded our notions of sacred text, enabling us to integrate the Torah of our lives into the Torah of our tradition. We are asking new questions of Torah and reading our sacred text with contemporary insight and understanding. We are finding that there is much to uncover and recover in our history that speaks to us directly as women and restores to us a sense of our presence in and at the most important moments of our history.