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GENDER ISSUES IN JEWISH DAY SCHOOLS

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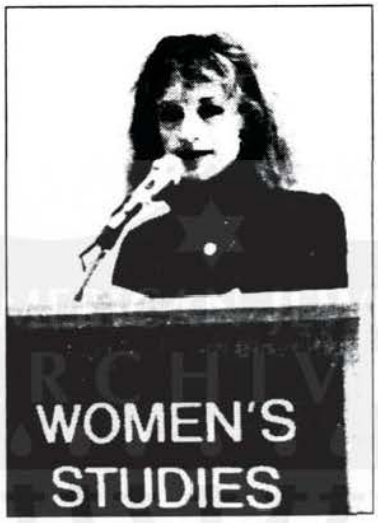
PLENARY ADDRESS

by Nessa Rapoport

In her address, writer Nessa Rapoport discussed the great questions provoked by the subject of gender in Jewish education. What does it mean to be a Jew? What does it mean to be a Jewish citizen? Does what we teach our children about the beauty of the tradition apply to all Jews? These questions and others have profound educational implications for the lives of the boys and girls who will build the Jewish future. They highlight the productive tension between the precedents and safeguards of history and the principles of equality and justice at the heart of our tradition.



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DREAMS OF PARADISE: LEARNING IN GOD'S IMAGE

We live in the second creation story, dreaming of inhabiting the first. We live in a world man enters alone, where woman is still a part taken from the whole of him. But all of us — men and women — can dream of paradise, of a universe where God creates a person first, in the divine image, and only then, and only equally, and only to us rather than to animals, gives gender, blesses us, and sees that all is very, very good.

Named male and female, *zachar u'nekevah*, at the mysterious beginning, it is no wonder that we find gender at the profound heart of what we do. Today, then, marks the start of a conversation about a large and complex subject. It would belittle its enormity to offer simplistic answers. It would also trivialize the magnitude of the issues to ignore them any longer. Our tradition has renewed itself by asking important questions, different questions in every generation. I believe that those raised by matters of gender are among today's most serious questions.

The boys and girls in our classroom grow up to be the men and women of the Jewish future. What we believe the Jewish tradition says about gender; which texts we teach and how we teach them; whose history we tell and how we tell it; what words we say in prayer and what metaphors we choose to describe the One we pray to; how we ourselves embody and represent adult Jewish men and women to these students; whether men, women, or both have genuine authority in the school and in the community; whether boys, girls, or both participate in classroom discussion or lead extra-curricular clubs; whether each or both are the subject of dress codes: All of these factors tell the true story of Jewish men and women to Jewish boys and girls. All of these factors affect what Jewish boys and girls grow up believing about each other; about their own possibilities to contribute to the tradition; and about their willingness to struggle with the inevitable tensions among the demands of the hour, of the future, and of the ages.

By what authority do we undertake this inquiry? It is often said that a critique of the status quo about gender in the Jewish world derives from feminism, and that feminism is an alien implant onto the body of Jewish tradition. And so I will begin by locating some of the deepest questions elicited by Jewish life today as lying at the heart of Jewish education, rather than outside it.

I am the fortunate recipient of an excellent, if old-fashioned, Orthodox day school education. Here are some of the precepts I was taught that continue to make my tradition beloved to me, alongside the questions they raised in my mind:

1.* En am ha'aretz chasid.** ***An ignorant person cannot be pious.

I assume this is the reason that my school was committed to a curriculum identical for boys and girls. Everyone studied *Torah*, *Nevi'im*, *Ketuvim*, *Talmud*, *historiah*, *sifrut* (literature), *dikduk* (grammar), and *machshevet yisrael* (Jewish thought).

I therefore found it hard to understand, even when confronted with the quotations of eminent sages telling me so, why women should not study the Oral Law or should be limited in their access to the great living works that have sustained us for thousands of years.

2. The tradition privileges certain* mitzvot *conducted in public community rather than privately undertaken.

In prayer, it prefers three people over one, and ten people over three.

I was therefore puzzled by the fact that the boys in my class, who received the same education I did, were commanded to serve God in public liturgical roles that I had been taught were central to the tradition but were denied to me. Why, if it was the greatest honor to come before the congregation of Israel and say a blessing over the Torah, was it an honor for which half the people were eligible by birth — and the other half could never earn? Why would a bird's-eye view of my childhood synagogues reveal the Torah scroll at the very center, surrounded by a small circle of men attending to it, surrounded by a larger circle of men responding to it, and overlooked by a balcony or an outer circle of women whose presence or absence made, quite literally, no difference to the activities of the congregants who counted?

3. Unlike paganism, Judaism does not measure worthiness by the body, by materiality, by biology, but rather by our ability to sanctify those givens and make them holy.

A Jew, I was taught, never outgrows the need to hold a *siddur* in the hand in order to pray; never becomes "too spiritual" to require the concrete aid of *tallit* and *tefillin* in order to offer up words to the Ineffable.

It was then quite perplexing to me that half the Jews in the class turned out not to need any such aid at all. It was confusing that men needed *tallit* and *tefillin* every day, while women, through a mysterious equation of biology and spirituality that would have been deemed pagan had it been applied to men, were "too spiritual" to require the means to prayer and God that our people had sanctioned. For my education did not say: Male Jews need these aids to prayer. What I learned was: This is how a Jew prays.

4. In the rabbinic Judaism we have inherited, a Jew is a direct agent. Unlike other religions, we do not have intermediaries—no priests, no appointed substitutes to expiate our transgressions. Unlike other traditions, we have no caste system, nor human gods to take on our sins. Only our own contrition to God and our deliberate redress to those human beings we have wronged can restore wholeness to the world.

And so it was confusing to see that a woman could not be a witness, could not initiate a divorce, but a male Jew could. It was equally confusing that when a woman gave birth, her husband went before the congregation to recite a blessing or receive an *aliyah*, while she sat publicly silent.

***5. It is the greatest of privileges to live a life of* mitzvot.**

One can be a righteous human being without being a Jew, but the fulfillment of God's will through *mitzvot* is an exalted path indeed.

This made it difficult for me to understand why the boys in my class and some of my teachers would say: "You're so lucky you don't have to put on *tallit* and *tefillin* every day. Women are so lucky they have fewer obligations." Such statements, and I heard them often, did not seem to align with the privilege of *mitzvot* heralded in those same classrooms. Rather, they resembled some of the explanations I heard about why diaspora Jews had to celebrate two days of *yontif* — punishment for not living in Eretz Yisrael.

Strange explanation. Is it good or bad to have more holy days? Is it good or bad to have fewer obligations, when those obligations are a defining characteristic of Jewish life and are responsible — I was taught by the same teachers — for the blessing in which men thank their Creator for not being made women?

Such precepts expose the contradictions that lie within any ancient, living tradition. They reveal the great questions: What does it mean to be a Jew? What does it mean to be a Jewish citizen? Does what we teach children about the beauty of the Jewish tradition apply to all Jews? How do we reconcile the value of equality at the heart of the tradition with the existence of status, inherently unequal yet seemingly central? Or the existence of roles for men and women assigned by gender rather than by gift, aptitude, or sacred calling?

One could dismiss these questions by saying: Only an Orthodox education would have such inherent conflicts. But I want to suggest that although these questions may take different forms in different settings, they do not disappear. When I told a friend of mine who is a rabbi about the subject of this talk, and asked her whether in the egalitarian school she founded the question of gender and Jewish education simply dissolves, she shook her head vehemently. In her school, girls and boys are required to wear *kippot*. But some of the women teachers, role models to the students, do not feel comfortable wearing *kippot* themselves. This disparity has educational implications, as all disparities do. In other schools, boys are obligated to wear *kippot*, but for girls *kippot* are voluntary — and so most girls don't wear them.

I am my own controlled experiment in this regard. Under the guidance of an Orthodox teacher, who taught me that one cannot voluntarily assume the obligation of *tefillin* unless one does it with full responsibility, I did indeed pray with *tefillin* for more than two years in my early twenties. And I can testify that our tradition is eminently correct. When you must put on *tefillin* every day, you are less likely to skip prayer, to shorten it, and or to pray only when it's convenient.

Why did I stop? Why do I not resume? What does it mean to my children that they don't see me do it? What might it mean if they did? Why do I feel uncomfortable when I see a woman in a crocheted *kippah* but not in the embroidered Bukharan pillbox *kippah* I sometimes wear?

How do we honor our created differences? How do we forge a Jewish society that extends tradition and yet reshapes it?

And so it would be a mistake to equate *halakhic* issues with issues of gender. Even setting aside those issues that are a *halakhic* conflict for some — such as women being witnesses or being counted in a *minyan* — one can find *halakhic* authority and precedent for women wearing *tallit* and *tefillin*; for women reciting *kiddush*; for women having *aliyot*. And yet in how many Jewish day schools do boys and girls learn that this is so, or see an equal number of role models for these possibilities?

It is therefore important to conduct a serious discussion of gender and Jewish education in two realms: what is possible, and what exists; what Jews could theoretically do, and how Jews actually live. Often mistaken for each other, they are not nearly the same thing.

We must ask ourselves why. Why, even in instances when one cannot cite *halakhah* as a barrier, does the Jewish world still look the way it does? Here I would like to comment that no Jewish stream can afford to be smug. We may

be able to quote theoretical ideals from denominational responsa and from institutional mission statements, but let us not be under the illusion that we have been fully responsible to the enormity of the questions implicit in today's topic.

Let me give you an example:

For years I have been observing a phenomenon in New York City's Jewish cultural life that I have not been able to decode. Why, when we bemoan the permeability of American Jews to the press of American culture on the Jewish tradition, have Jews proved themselves to be so singularly unamenable to current ideas about gender? Why were the Jewish lecture series offerings in such liberal institutions as the 92nd St. Y, Hebrew Union College, and the New York Public Library in one recent year delivered exclusively by male lecturers? Why, in settings where such equality could not be ruled out by religious ideology or cultural conservatism, were these Jewish offerings, when viewed through the lens of gender, no different from the ads that might have appeared forty years earlier, in the heart of the fifties, when I was growing up and men's and women's roles were the most rigid and alienated from each other than they would ever be in this century?

What I suspect is that somewhere in most Jewish hearts and minds, whether or not they were exposed to a living, authentic tradition of Jewish learning, lies an idea. And the idea is that only one kind of person *really* knows, and that person is a male person. Secretly, probably, a rabbi. With a beard.

If we probe a little more deeply beneath this image, we may ask: What do we believe that those we deem "the only ones who really know" actually know? We might find that they know the venerable tradition of writings and commentaries produced by centuries of men who were, in fact, rabbis with beards!

And when we think about the tradition of learning most esteemed by the elite who have access to it, we find fairly quickly that knowledge of the Talmud and its interpreters is the most highly valued kind of knowledge. Although the proportion of Jews who have access to this learning and could be considered masters of it is very small indeed, there is an amazing trickle-down effect to contemporary Jewish culture. Behind the offerings of these institutions is a template of Jewish education. The rabbinic commentators, their rabbinic students, and today's programmers share that template, even if unconsciously. It shapes whom they choose as authoritative transmitters of knowledge — and whom they exclude.

It does not seem to matter what the setting is, nor what the training is of those who have done the choosing. I have looked at the curricula of prestigious adult education programs in North America that are offered by non-denominational institutions to Jews of all denominations. What you find is the same expanding pyramid I encountered as a child in my day school: Torah, Talmud, and rabbinic commentaries, ending with a few twentieth-century Jewish philosophers — Buber, Rosenzweig, Heschel.

Since, as Jews, we negotiate with our canon but will never overturn it, we need to acknowledge with open eyes and an open heart that we have inherited an elite culture in which one gender has had absolute hegemony in creating the body of our sacred texts. This hegemony suggests some important questions for Jewish education, in its content, its interpretation, and its audiences.

What does it mean to be a girl encountering a tradition in which not one of the classical

authorities, those I was taught would always be more authoritative than any of our own day, has her face, her gender? If, for example, she were Christian, she could perhaps reinvent Mary; she could play the liturgical music of Hildegard von Bingen; study the writings of Julian of Norwich or St. Teresa, women whose intellectual life was made possible by the convent.

As a Jew, however, this girl cannot find even one such authority in the rabbinic tradition. All the positive emphasis on family life and life in the community — as opposed to an ascetic ideal — ensured that impossibility, one that continues to be both necessary and desirable to all of us.

Further, what does it mean that those authorities were not only descriptive of the tradition but prescriptive? What does it mean to every Jew that one gender of Jews has established and interpreted binding law? What, then, are we teaching not just our girls but our boys about who knows, who counts, who is important and who has the right to decide? This last question must be asked at both the philosophical and curricular level. What does it feel like to be a Jewish boy or girl absorbing this unconscious lesson day after day? What does it mean to be taught to love a tradition that carries within it such authority about gender in those deemed authoritative? And how might contemporary research about the way girls learn illuminate this dilemma?

These questions run far deeper than the beautiful words I learned about how Judaism distinguished itself in its treatment of women in the Middle Ages, in its injunctions about how a husband should treat a wife, in its legal protections that, alas, no longer obtain but fortified us for centuries?

The real mystery of gender's meaning will begin to unfold only when the implications of such central structures are addressed forthrightly. Only with unflinching reflection upon these realities can transformation begin. It may not be possible to have a single classic woman commentator, but it is possible to teach boys and girls to notice that. The past shapes the future but need not determine it.

To return to my day school education: When we studied the laws of slavery, the teacher did not teach them as if slavery were an understood fact of life. Rather, we were given an entire educational apparatus about *how* to read those laws. We learned both the increasing attempt to humanize the condition of slaves in the Bible and by the rabbis, and we also learned that slavery was abolished for profoundly Jewish reasons.

I saw no contradiction in Judaism's gradual evolution from legal compassion to legal abolishment. This kind of education freed my teachers to be truthful to another precept I was taught: That Judaism acknowledged the imperfect human world even as it demanded spiraling redemption.

This analogue of interpretation provides merely a hint of a direction. To think seriously about how we read these rabbis and these texts for the entire Jewish community demands intensive and prolonged inquiry on many levels, far exceeding the boundaries of this talk and of this day. There are scholars beginning to write about how we can read our sacred texts with the consideration of gender in mind; the challenge of "translating" their work into what happens in a Jewish school, into how we teach and how we learn, lies before us, mostly untouched.

Let me now suggest other directions that Jewish educators and parents might pursue. A Jew learns by studying; a Jew also learns by watching the Jews who came before her or him.

We can read about the importance of *tzedakah*. But my seven-year-old son does not put a quarter in his *tzedakah* box each week because he studied the sources at his day school. He puts it there because his grandfather gives him a dollar allowance each week on condition that a quarter of it go to *tzedakah*. His grandfather models this behavior and expects it. By the time my son encounters the laws of *tzedakah*, he will be, in the august tradition of *na'aseh v'nishmah*, several years into being a doer.

There are, then, many Jewish ways of "knowing" that turn out to matter. We learn how to be Jews not only by studying what venerable Jews have said and written but also by studying and imitating how venerable Jews have lived. So on the curricular level, we could ask ourselves whether or not it is important to present models of Jewish women's lives—because fifty percent of the Jews who lived and transmitted our tradition were women. Some of them were unremarkable in a public sense; their lives may be important for precisely that reason. But some of them led remarkable public lives as well. We can look at what we're teaching and ask whether it is truly representative of the history of the Jewish people. Although we do not have nearly an equal body of knowledge about Jewish women's lives compared to men's, we have much more material to turn to and discover in history than we do in rabbinic commentary.

I will offer an anecdote to illustrate just how powerful such stories can be, even to a woman as deeply inside and committed to the tradition as I am. For several years, Ma'yan, the Jewish Women's Project of the Upper West Side in New York, has been holding a feminist seder. These seders have become so popular that Ma'yan has had to schedule two, three, and four seders in a row to accommodate the demand.

Feminist that I am, I nevertheless felt no particular need to go. Pesach has always been my favorite holiday, and my family's seder has been the high point of my year. I grew up surrounded by loving parents, uncles, aunts, and cousins, all committed to intensive Jewish education, literate in Hebrew, and passionate about Judaism. We read the Haggadah by going around the table; everyone participated, singing and laughing, and sometimes crying, well into the night. I knew, of course, that the seder is a living organism, but like many people who couldn't wait to leave the city of my birth, my greatest pleasure as I grew older was reconnecting with the seder of my youth.

And so I entered the feminist ceremony with skepticism. As it turned out, I enjoyed being in a room full of women so excited by this event, even if the texts were for the most part in English and were contemporary reinterpretations of texts I knew by heart. But I was astonished by the power of the sections in this ritual that told the names and stories of historic Jewish women, from Dona Gracia Nasi in the Renaissance to Zivia Lubetkin, the Shoah resistance fighter.

Why did I find myself, quite unexpectedly, in tears? Because I realized that after more than forty years of loving the seder with my heart, soul, and might, I had not heard a single Jewish woman's name on seder night. I had never noticed that all the long beautiful night of the seder, all through the citations of "Rabbi Yossi and Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva," all through the paragraphs we added on the Shoah, on Soviet Jews, I could not look at this paradigmatic text and find this aspect of myself within it.

If gender doesn't matter, such an absence makes no difference. But since it has mattered from the very beginning, it is powerful indeed

to find Jewish women in a story about freedom and redemption. I would like my daughter to experience that electricity. And I would like my son to discover it as well.

I want to emphasize that it is as important for Jewish boys as it is for Jewish girls to understand that Jewish history was lived by both men and women. It is also, I would suggest, not particularly healthy for a people currently obsessed with its desire that Jewish men and women marry each other to present a tradition that tells the story of one gender rather than of both.

What can we learn from how Jews have lived? was the question I asked. This question becomes more urgent in light of two considerations: age and the desire for wisdom. The older I get, the more I want other kinds of Jewish knowledge, not only what the tradition dictates but how Jews have mediated it to live it; not only what the tradition says but how it can light my life as a Jewish woman.

Who can be my teachers? Here I encounter some of the most sublime paradoxes. For my teachers turn out to be my ancestors — and they reside in both domains, text and life. I am the oldest daughter of four sisters, descendants of an ancient rabbinic family. In being a member of this family and one of a family of only daughters, I represent many of the conflicts I have raised.

Out of pride in this lineage, I have kept my birth name. But it is my father's, not my mother's, name. And then something like this happens: Beit Hatfutsot, Israel's Museum of the Diaspora, decides to map the entire genealogy of one Jewish family. The family they choose is the Rapoports. Shortly after they begin, they encounter a complication. It seems that there was a longstanding tradition among the Rapoports that women who married nevertheless retained their family name, wreaking havoc for genealogists and enhancing my appreciation of the complexity of gender in history.

In another example where the personal meets the political, I was brought up to know that all Rapoports who are *kohanim*, priests, are related to each other. Being of a family of *kohanim* was seen as a matter of aristocracy. But I am, in fact, a *bat kohen*, not a *kohen*. And yet, although I would not want to be a priest sacrificing animals in the Temple, even if I were permitted to be, *and* although I'm a vegetarian, I also don't want to lose what I inherited: the sense of having been bequeathed something irreplaceable and worth preserving, something for which so many of my ancestors lived and gave their lives. My complicated relationship to this family history is a metaphor for our relationship to Judaism itself, when it comes to issues of gender. What to discard? What to retain? How to balance pride and loyalty with equally compelling values within the tradition?

None of this undoes my commitment to the premise that boys and girls should have equal access to and participation in the great conversation of Judaism. Rather, such tensions embody the strains between history and justice that Jewish education must grapple with. For that which I do not want to relinquish in my family history is that which those in authority do not want to relinquish in the synagogue and in the school.

Even as I claim the Shach and the Shir as my paternal ancestors, I need to learn from the life of my maternal grandmother. And what I need to learn from her, the Shach and the Shir cannot teach me. My grandmother was an observant

Jewish woman, the mother of five children, a devout Jew who read the *parashah* on the couch each Shabbat afternoon. But before anyone gets misty-eyed and thinks I am suggesting that study must be complemented by sentimentality, let me say this: My grandmother was also the first woman to receive a Ph.D. in physics from the University of Toronto. She was a commentator on Canada's national radio, a founder of the first Montessori-based progressive Jewish day school in Toronto, and a reporter at the United Nations on the status of women.

As such, she is not only a private figure for me to emulate but a contributor to the history of our people. She represents a commitment to traditional Jewish life *and* a commitment to fulfilling all the gifts God gave her. Both commitments were rooted in a religious conviction about herself as a created being in relation to her Creator. Jewish girls need to know that a Canadian woman born in 1897 could think like that, could lead a life like that. Jewish boys need to know it at least as much.

Incorporating the story of such women into the curriculum of Jewish schools, presenting a wide range of such models, is not a parochial retrieval project for feminists but a righting of the balance for all Jews. We need to know much more about how Jews lived, because it is in life, not only in text, that we grow resourceful and solve problems.

Each of us can begin by asking ourselves: What do we want Jewish boys and girls to know about each other? What do we want them to know about each other in the past—the past that educators know determines, in how it is relayed, the kind of future those children will go out to create?

Do not underestimate the challenge. Asking and addressing these questions elicits enormous, often immediate resistance, not only on the part of men but sometimes on the part of women, too. Even accepting the implications of these questions is not the same as instituting change. It is very hard to change even one personal habit, let alone the force of a millennial tradition with its legitimate anxiety and safeguards for preserving itself. Some of the most important developments of our day, such as the increasing number of women in all Jewish settings who are becoming fluent in the textual tradition or who are becoming leaders of Jewish educational institutions, could prove to be an interesting historic footnote if we do not persevere. More than twenty years after these questions were first publicly raised, for example, I still cannot go into a Jewish bookstore and buy a child's *siddur* for my three-year-old daughter that has both Hebrew text and illustrations of girls' praying. The work has only begun.

And yet. Aren't those the two necessary words, the words we keep repeating? We may not have a single woman commentator from the classical tradition to turn to, but we have the entire dialectical method to employ in our quest. We may encounter a tradition that has not been able to be equitable to Jewish men and women, but we also have the double Biblical injunction to pursue justice. We may find it frightening to presume to scrutinize the mountain of the tradition at whose foot we stand, but we have the Talmudic story in which the law is given to humankind, the story of how, in the choice between the heavens' determining the law and the human interpreters' prevailing, God laughs and says: "My children have defeated me; my children have defeated me."

Finally, it is worth remembering this: We have the dream of establishing a Jewish community where, both in learning and in life,

authority resides not in the precedent of one gender over another but in the only source worthy of deference, the only sovereignty without capricious and arbitrary limitation — that of our Creator, who uttered the words that began this story.