

COMMUNICATIONS

TO THE EDITOR OF *TRADITION*:

I am sorry that my copy of the Spring 1979 issue of *Tradition* arrived on *erev Shabbat Shuvah*, because I sat down to read it on Friday evening, and one of the articles evoked anger in me which is inappropriate during the "Days of Awe." Specifically, I found Reuven P. Bulka's piece, "Woman's Role—Some Ultimate Concerns," to be an insult to the readership of *Tradition*, women, in general, and Jewish women, in particular.

Firstly, is there really any place in a serious "journal of Orthodox Jewish thought" for such cornball nonsense which asserts that the Jews of Galicia had long ago removed any sexist implications with reference to the Almighty by pronouncing the Hebrew word *Hu* as *He*? Surely Bulka was not serious; then why include it?

Secondly, Bulka distorts Margaret Mead when he claims that her findings were "that women are most content not when granted influence, power or wealth, but when the female role of wife and mother is properly valued." Mead's own words provide a very different implication from that which Bulka provides:

In our current Western theorizing, it has been too often ignored that envy of the male role can come *as much* from an undervaluation of the role of the wife and mother as from an overvaluation of public aspects of achievement that have been reserved for men. When *all* achievement is outside the home, women of enterprise and achievement hate to be told that they must confine themselves there, but when the home itself is undervalued, then also women will cease to enjoy being women, and men will neither envy nor value the female role. [*Male and Female*, (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1949), p. 92.] (Emphasis added.)

Thirdly, Bulka violates basic principles of logic in his arguments. He sets up a "paper tiger" by quoting a number of radical feminists and then proceeds to reject all of feminism under his dismissal of the extremists. The fact that most women, Jewish or not, do not subscribe to the positions of the radicals does not seem to have greatly concerned Bulka. He, apparently, does not even abide by his own statement that, "The male population must approach the women's liberation situation with humility and honesty" He dismisses *Bat Mitsvah* celebrations on the grounds that modern *Bar Mitsvah* celebrations have "done wonders in denigrating Jewish values and in discouraging Jewish continuity." Therefore, "To have girls share in this farce is to again reduce them to the level of boys." Would it not have been more honest to reject both *Bat* and *Bar Mitsvah* celebrations which are not in accordance with Jewish tradition and values, rather than rejecting solely the *Bat Mitsvah*, and implicitly even if it is conducted properly?

As it stands, Bulka's article rejects all of feminism and, by implication, denies that there are real and valid challenges which many sincere and observant Jewish women (and men) are struggling with. Most of them do not reject either marriage or family life, despite their educational and career attainments and ambitions. What many do seek is a restructuring of institutional arrangements, within a halakhic framework, which would take cognizance of the contemporary needs of both women and men. This calls for reducing the inequities and underrepresentation of women in the institutions of the public sphere and those of men in the private, family, sphere. Few would disagree with Bulka that, "the Jewish stance should entertain quite seriously reorienting the focus or inner space, and vigorously work to bring self-exiled man back to where he belongs."

Had Bulka been as humble and honest throughout his article as he was in the few paragraphs near the conclusion, he would have made a contribution to Orthodox Jewish thought. Regretfully, he chose to adopt a basically ostrich-like stance, which makes one wonder what he would say about the "radical" efforts of the late Sarah Shnirer, who was a pioneer in establishing an educational system which would provide quality Jewish education for observant young women, and to the participation of *Harav* Soloveitchik in the founding of the *beit midrash* program at Stern College-Yeshiva University.

Chaim I. Waxman
Rutgers University

TO THE EDITOR OF TRADITION:

The continuing publication of articles and essays on the role of women in the modern Orthodox Jewish community is evidence that the salience of this issue has not diminished over the past few years. No other area within the social structure of the Jewish community has been the subject of such extensive discussion and controversy over the past decade.

Rabbi Bulka's recent article in *Tradition* represents the latest contribution to the discussion. Unfortunately, in focusing his article around "Some Ultimate Concerns," Rabbi Bulka has allotted little space to more immediate concerns. The radical feminist rhetoric which he criticizes has little bearing on the problem of the role of women within an Orthodox Jewish community. Lesbianism and "obliterating sex differences" are largely irrelevant in this context. Furthermore, the increasing concern for equality between men and women does not, *a priori*, threaten the centrality or cohesiveness of the Jewish family, but rather should serve to

strengthen it. Finally, a large number of traditional young Jewish women, including many who are concerned about equality, accept the halakhic distinctions between the roles of men and women as givens (although many would prefer to see the inequalities eliminated, despite the many attempts to justify them).

This is not to say, however, that the role of women in the Jewish community is not a problem or that whatever inequality that exists must be perpetuated and is unchangeable. The essential social problem which the Orthodox Jewish community faces is not radical feminism, but the fact that there is no role for single women within the community or its institutions. Traditionally, a woman went straight from her father's house to her husband's domain. Single women were anomalous and generally outside the framework of the Jewish community.

It is not uncommon now for men and women to leave their parents' home and their communities to pursue education and careers in other places. Synagogues, however, are oriented around families and children. Unmarried young men often find a community and a role in the *minyan* or in study groups. In contrast, single women in their twenties and thirties are usually relegated to "singles groups," which are often simply extensions of the youth group. Single, professional Jewish women, whose education and intellectual capabilities are in no way inferior to those of their male counterparts, are seldom given any intellectual opportunities within the structure of the Jewish community. Without any other place in the institutional structure, it is not surprising that such women have very tenuous connections with the organized community.

While men, regardless of marital status, are encouraged to study Jewish law and Talmud and, in these areas, are able to pursue whatever intellectual level they are capable of, women continue to

be excluded from such pursuits. For reasons rooted in the anachronistic depths of male dominance, the Jewish education of women ceases with *humash* and *Tsenau U Rena*; the intellectual skills which are required for Rashi, to say nothing of *Talmud*, are apparently felt to be beyond the capability of women. Thus, while women may study the most demanding of secular disciplines, they are excluded from the male bastions in which Mishnah and Talmud are studied and debated. There is no reason for perpetuating this inequality and the formation of study groups for women may simultaneously create a place within the institutional structure for single women.

Debates on the role of women in the Jewish community and how to deal with women's inequality continue for a long time and will go beyond the question of *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvah* extravaganzas and the adoption of new rituals and symbols for *Rosh Hodesh*. We would hope that future entrants into the fray will address themselves to these immediate concerns.

Gerald M. Steinberg
Connie T. Steinberg

RABBI BULKA REPLIES:

Both Dr. Chaim Waxman and Gerald and Connie Steinberg raise important issues in their letter-reactions to my article on women's role. For the purposes of response, I should like to deal with the issues raised chronologically.

I, too, am sorry that I evoked in Dr. Waxman an anger which is inappropriate during the "Days of Awe." However, I cannot share with him either the view that the general remarks made in the article were insulting or the specific criticisms which he levels. Read carefully, the article is the very opposite of an insult.

With regard to the "cornball

nonsense," first, there is nothing wrong with injecting a bit of humor even into a serious piece. Secondly, my remark came immediately following the allusion to the new Jewish woman's *Haggadah*, which deleted reference to God as King since this was a sexist reference to God as a male. It was here that I injected this remark, which was obviously a sarcastic extension of a very ridiculous expurgation process. It was not a serious remark but it effectively showed the ridiculousness of the underlying ethos of the new *Haggadah*.

With regard to Dr. Waxman's assertion that I distorted Margaret Mead's quotation, he unfortunately left out the first part of the paragraph from which he quoted. That first part reads as follows:

This Manus example is *very instructive* because it represents a case where women do not enjoy being women, not because public rewards given males are denied to them—influence, power, wealth, are all open to women—but because the sensuous creative significance of the feminine role of wife and mother is so undervalued. [*Male and Female* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1975), p. 92. In the edition of Mead's work cited in my original article and published by Dell Books in 1968, this quotation is on page 110.]

When this part of the paragraph is fused together with the end paragraph cited by Dr. Waxman, it indeed gives off the very implications which are projected in the article. Mead's use of the words "very instructive" (the emphasis is mine) are indicative of a feeling that this is the manifestation of a very important point, namely that women are most content when the feminine role of wife and mother is properly valued. It seems to be a logical interpretation of her remarks.

With regard to my setting up a paper tiger, I can only say that I hope it

turns out to be a paper tiger. I mentioned repeatedly in the article that the mainstream is removed from the radical wing (see, for example, page 28) but, at the same time, I cautioned that the radicalism of today often becomes the norm of tomorrow. Aside from that, I cited evidence that even radicalism has crept into the discussion. Witness, for example, the outlandish proposal of Gendler (p. 32). Also, it should have been clear in the article that the entire syndrome of "sameness" is a pervading force even in the less radical arena of Jewish feminism.

Dr. Waxman is correct in his arguing that it would be more honest to reject both *Bat* and *Bar Mitzvah* celebrations as not in accordance with Jewish tradition and values, and he implies from my article that I was only rejecting *Bat Mitzvah*. However, I was not addressing myself to the *Bar Mitzvah* issue *per se*, but I would agree wholeheartedly with his point. It would perhaps be helpful to parenthetically add that the implied hope in having a meaningful *Bat Mitzvah* expression would serve to bring the *Bar Mitzvah* celebration back to where it should be, but there is nothing stated in the article that legitimizes Dr. Waxman's assertion that the *Bar Mitzvah* farce should be maintained. If anything, the opposite is true.

Dr. Waxman, in his concluding remarks, and this is a point raised also in the Steinbergs' letter, asserts that I have rejected all feminism and, by implication, have denied the role challenges with which many sincere observant Jewish women are struggling. This, however, misses the point of the article. The article projected the extreme, showed how even the moderate expressions have some similar underlying trends, and then attempted to refocus the Jewish community's thought processes towards inner space. It was not the purpose of the article to get into specific issues; it was concerned only with the "ultimate issues." This should have been clear.

Both Waxman and the Steinbergs lament what was missing in the piece, but there was never any intention to address these issues in my presentation, merely to sift out underlying trends. The issues raised by Waxman and the Steinbergs are legitimate, serious issues which have been handled quite adequately in past issues of *Tradition* and other serious publications and will hopefully continue to be addressed. The point of my presentation was that we must transcend apologetics and be much more positive and assertive about the juxtaposition of roles and responsibilities and appreciative of the essentiality of women to the survival of the species.

The Steinbergs raise a number of points, some of which are overlapped by the comments of Dr. Waxman. Obliterating sex differences may be irrelevant in the context of Jewish feminism, but the trend towards sameness, as was emphasized earlier, is a shared ingredient. The Steinbergs are correct in their assertion that concern for equality is not a threat to the cohesiveness of the family, but should, in fact, serve to strengthen it. But equality and sameness are two different things and the abdication of specific strengths in the interest of "equality" is not the most desirable approach. This, in fact, is one of the major points of my presentation. The Steinbergs themselves seem to be a little ambiguous when in their next statement they say that the young women accept the distinction between the roles of men and women as given but would like to see the inequalities eliminated. They seem, at one and the same time, to affirm and deny the existence of a "syndrome of sameness."

With regard to the question of having a "role" within the community, I recognize there is a problem, especially for single women, and this problem must be addressed very seriously. However, I should also like to caution that the matter of roles is associated with self-actualization, a feature which is

quite prominent in the feminist movement, and that, as was pointed out in the article, self-actualization itself is self-defeating. If the desire is one of self-transcendence, then not only are the dynamics more healthy, but the element of natural orientation towards the community more enhanced.

The specifics of the particular position of women within the Jewish community is a matter of immediate concern. The question of the philosophy within which these immediate concerns are addressed is a matter of ultimate concern. I have no problems relating to the efforts of the late Sarah Shnirer or

anyone for that matter, who would enhance the skills, knowledge, awareness, and sensitivity of women and, incidentally, even of men.

The major concern in these particular and specific details and nuances is the philosophy upon which they are based. If it is to equalize in the sense of sameness, then it can boomerang on society. If it is to bring out the best in women who would be projected as a model for the proper valuation of inner space, then it will address both the immediate and ultimate needs of the Jewish community in particular and society in general.