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## ***RUPTURED GENDER ROLES IN A TEXT-CENTERED WORLD***

**I**n returning to “Rupture and Reconstruction” more than a decade after my first encounter with it as a college student, I find myself appreciating entirely new dimensions of the essay. While an undergraduate at Stern College, I had the good fortune to study the history of halakha with Professor Haym Soloveitchik. It was easily one of the best courses I have ever taken in any educational setting. By that time the essay had taken on mythological proportions, and Soloveitchik was not generally inclined to discuss it too much with his students, reminding us that he was a historian and not a contemporary sociologist. With apologies to my professor, it now seems to me that the essay’s deep historical observations raise important questions about at least one subsequent sociological development: the rise of women’s Torah learning and religious leadership more broadly. Indeed, Soloveitchik himself anticipates the relevance of this topic in the essay’s first footnote. Yet perhaps the absent discussion of women’s learning in “Rupture and Reconstruction” also points to a deeper difficulty. Whereas in a mimetic world, the Jewish woman had a clear and essential role in the perpetuation of Jewish tradition, in our contemporary world, some of this certainty is lacking. Women’s scholarship has hardly compensated for this void, and there is a sense in which the modern Jewish woman is caught between two divergent modes of being.

“Rupture and Reconstruction” famously maps the transition from a traditional form of Judaism passed down through direct example to an often more punctilious observance mediated by texts and educational institutions. We still live in the latter religious climate that Soloveitchik identifies in his essay. One subsequent development is that many of the Modern Orthodox individuals who turned to the right along the lines that Soloveitchik describes have since fully crossed over to the Haredi camp. Others have created a kind of Modern Orthodox-Haredi fusion that may not have existed in the same form when the essay was first written. At the same time, left-wing Orthodoxy or “Open Orthodoxy” has

also gained a following. It is unclear how Open Orthodoxy's emphasis on inclusion and political activism maps onto Soloveitchik's divide between mimetic and text-based Judaism.

Because this spirit of progressivism continues to make inroads into parts of the Orthodox community, we are continually confronted with questions regarding the role of women within Orthodoxy. In nearly every subset of the Orthodox world, each in its own way, women's formal learning is now ubiquitous. Most of the time it is not the rigorous Talmud study that Orthodox feminists might have imagined. One might even argue that some higher-level efforts in this arena have plateaued. But it does seem that across the Orthodox world more and more classes are offered for women, Passover programs feature popular female speakers, and the pages of Jewish magazines and newspapers are filled with writing by, if not always images of, intelligent, well-spoken women who are conversant in their faith. This dynamic seems in part to reflect the text-based Jewish culture in which we live. A hunger for Jewish learning brings women outside of their home. A practical halakha class by a local rebbetzin or an inspiring article on Chabad.org may in some ways evoke or even self-consciously recall the mimetic world of yore, but in truth, these modes also reflect a textual universe in which authority stems from outside the domestic realm rather than within it. As Soloveitchik discusses in the essay, there is a way in which a turn to texts over traditional transmission in the halakhic sphere presents a potential move toward democratization of Torah learning more broadly. This may efface traditional distinctions for women and men even as those distinctions may take on greater significance due to the content of the texts in question being taken more seriously.

In that sense, the turn to texts may not inevitably disrupt traditional gender roles in the Orthodox community. Such roles are perhaps accentuated by greater familiarity with and fealty to halakhic texts and norms, especially on a surface level (hair coverings and the like). Yet one of the unspoken assumptions of "Rupture and Reconstruction" is that a mimetic tradition is also one that has been historically mediated by women as much as men. Call it the "housewife's religious intuition" (66). It is in the Jewish home, ground zero for mimetic transmission, that the Jewish woman shined brightest. Inherent in this division, between the home and the yeshiva, between a sense of "intimacy" with God and an awareness of His "yoke," to paraphrase the famous last line of the essay, is a kind of complementarity. The authority of texts was certainly present in a mimetic world, but it was tempered by the more grassroots transmission of Jewish life represented by the home. While many women now follow a

male lead in carving out Torah learning opportunities in our modern climate, in a mimetic world they purveyed the tradition in a way that was specifically female. While Soloveitchik makes a compelling case for the historical supersession of one way of life for another, I wonder if what we are also seeing, beneath the surface, is the disruption of a delicate balance between men and women that had been cultivated over centuries.

While women continue to make strides in the world of Jewish learning, in both the elite and popular realms, at the moment the prospect of a serious female halakhic authority remains distant. Whether the question of external communal expectations or internal female motivation is responsible for this is another question, but ascribing responsibility or blame does not change the present reality. I often wonder if this new standard for Jewish greatness, along the contours that Soloveitchik outlines in describing our text- and yeshiva-centered modern religious culture, necessarily downplays the contributions of women who continue to nurture the physical and spiritual needs of their families and neighbors in the way that their foremothers did. And if the standards for the ideal religious woman change, could it be long before the reality on the ground also shifts? Is it likely that their male partners will fill in the void? Or, more likely, that some of these needs will simply go unfulfilled? It's instructive to see the language Soloveitchik uses when contrasting pre-war Jewish society with postwar. When looking to the past, he invokes "parents and friends," "men and women," who perpetuate Jewish life and identity in the domestic sphere, on the street, in synagogues and schools. As the locus moves toward formal institutions of Jewish learning, the gender balance is inevitably disrupted. The Orthodox feminist response was an attempt to correct this bias, rather than return to an irretrievable past. However, contemporary left-wing efforts to aggressively place women in roles of religious authority only seem to dilute the standards to which everyone subscribes. It is not always clear how certain strides toward "progress" for women might also have unintended, or even reverse effects.

Counterintuitively, as the world becomes more female-friendly, and takes most Orthodox communities along with it, those who advocate most stridently for "change" continue to hold women to a traditionally male standard. Appreciating the profound gifts that women have brought, and continue to bring, to the Jewish home and the broader community is one potential casualty of our new text-centric religious culture. The modern religious woman, more so than her male counterpart, remains suspended between the two worlds outlined in "Rupture and Reconstruction," which in their extreme forms are each unhealthy in their own way. In this position, she may also form something of a bridge that could enable a synthesis of the two.