2. Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*

Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981

Blu Greenberg (1936–) is Co-Founder and first President of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA).

Perhaps this is the only legitimate response one can make at this time: a series of tentative remarks. If feminism is a revolution, as I believe it is, and Judaism is and always has been the rock-bottom source of a Jew's values, thoughts, feelings, actions, mores, laws, and loves—how else can one respond to and be part of that turbulent encounter but with a stammer, one step forward and half a step backward. I envy those who can say, "This is Halakhah. That's it!" Or, "These are the absolute new truths, and nothing less will do!" I envy, but I also suspect, their unexamined complacency. I suspect that their fear is even greater than mine; therefore, they must keep the lid on even tighter and show no ambivalence, no caution, and no confusion.

So for me, despite the turbulence, or maybe because of it, it has not been all bad. I have had some very good feelings in the course of doing this work. The best of these has been a sense of being able to approach the sources without intimidation. The fact that I can think about the traditional sources without knowing them exhaustively, that I can bring to bear my own interpretative keys without diminishing the divinity and authority of the Halakhah and tradition—this has been a revelation for me. So, too, the experience, which all women alive today share, of stretching ourselves, our minds, our talents, our sights. Transition women, like myself, are taking everything less for granted and finding each step more exhilarating. (177–178)

COMMENTARY BY RACHEL GORDAN

It is impossible to examine the major changes in late twentieth-century American Judaism, without considering the influence of the writer and feminist Blu Greenberg. Her contributions to Modern Orthodoxy are quickly evident,

but so too is her transformative effect on the entire landscape of American Judaism, by the twenty-first century, as a result of her feminist questions and commitment to Judaism.

In 1981, when Greenberg published *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition,* few Orthodox women were yet publicly grappling with feminism. It was three years before Geraldine Ferraro became the first woman nominated by a major political party, and six years before the US Congress designated a women's history month. Indeed, many Americans felt that they had already dealt with and then buried feminism, along with their bellbottoms and other trappings of hippie culture. Even within Judaism, by the mid-1980s, the debate over female rabbinical ordination seemed closed, with Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Judaism having answered the question affirmatively. Few expected the issue of female ordination to be taken seriously within the most traditional of the movements of Judaism. Orthodox Jewish feminism was barely a blip on the radars of feminists or Jews. But through her writing and lectures, Greenberg brought Orthodox feminism into the foreground and became an agent of change, helping American Jews to think differently about a topic many had felt was destined to stay the same, forever: the role of women in Orthodox Judaism.

On Women and Judaism appeared fifteen years before Greenberg co-organized the first International Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy, and less than a decade after she had, somewhat accidentally, accepted an invitation to give the opening address at the first National Jewish Women's Conference, in 1973, an event that proved eye-opening, as Greenberg experienced her first women's minyan, and received her first Torah honor ("I found it an exhilarating moment," she wrote of the experience. "It was the first time I had ever held a Torah scroll") (33). Coming as it did between these two important events in Greenberg's career as a Jewish feminist, *On Women and Judaism* provided readers with a template for confronting Orthodox Judaism with the questions of feminism, even as the book expressed Greenberg's personal struggles to bridge the two. As she engaged with Jewish texts, in preparation for her 1973 speech, now reading through the lens of women's equality, a thirty-something Greenberg discovered that she could "no longer accept the apologetic line so popular among those in the traditional Jewish community" (31). It was not just a matter of "different role assignments," as had been the customary Orthodox response to feminist challenges. By this point, Betty Friedan had given Greenberg important food for thought. "Once I had tasted of the fruit of the tree of knowledge," Greenberg wrote of her 1960s experience of reading *The Feminine*

Mystique that "there was no going back. The basic idea had found a resting spot somewhere inside me" (27). So, too, did *On Women and Judaism* plant seeds of change among Greenberg's late twentieth-century readers.

In *On Women and Judaism* and in later writings, Greenberg modeled a questioning posture toward Judaism and a process of transformation, as she explained how even a woman largely content with Orthodoxy ("I knew my place, and I liked it—the warmth, the rituals, the solid, tight parameters," Greenberg wrote of her experience growing up in an Orthodox home) had come to embrace feminism, despite her initial reservations. In the book Greenberg made clear where her loyalties lay: "My questioning never will lead me to abandon tradition. I am part of a chain of tradition. I am part of a chain that is too strong to break" (36). Readers of *On Women and Judaism* came to know a woman who had made a happy home within Orthodoxy. As Greenberg explained, far from resenting her second career as the wife of an Orthodox rabbi, who was expected to host and to visit along with her husband, she had deep appreciation for her role as rebbetzin. (As Sheryl Sandberg would do, a generation later, in her own feminist-inspired first book, *Leaning In*, Greenberg acknowledged that her spouse, and his feminist proclivities, had a large influence on her own ability to grow personally and professionally.) Her life was enriched, Greenberg explained, because of her ability, as the rabbi's wife, to be present for so many important moments in congregants' lives.[1] Her love of Jews and Judaism had grown as a result.

At the same time, Greenberg described her own mid-life interrogation of the tradition that had nourished her for decades. Newly sensitized to feminist issues, Greenberg discovered that she now took offense at certain precepts and gender norms emanating from Orthodoxy. *Kol ishah* was one example. The prohibition on a woman singing in the presence of men had not been popular in Greenberg's youth; its reemergence in the 1970s seemed, to Greenberg, like "a counterpoint to women's new freedom of expression. ... To me, kol ishah seemed nothing but an overt slur on the female sex, an arbitrary curb on women in the name of a one-sided modesty meter" (36).

Personal reactions like this were new to Greenberg. By noting them and the change in her that they evidenced, Greenberg allowed readers to witness her feminist awakening. She also demonstrated her acceptance that her feminist questioning of Orthodoxy would be a lifelong journey, now that the veil had

1 Shuly Rubin Schwartz, *The Rabbi's Wife: The Rebbetzin in American Jewish Life* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 190–193.

been lifted: "I intend to keep my eyes wide open, watching to see what works and what doesn't, what is viable within the framework of Jewish tradition and what isn't" (36). Greenberg reminded her readers that Judaism, like all religions, has always been influenced by the surrounding culture. Recognizing that, "there is probably a great deal of tension in store for people like me," Greenberg wrote of those reconciling Judaism and feminism, that she nonetheless welcomed the challenge; she had faith that Judaism would emerge even stronger from its engagement with feminism.

Acknowledging the distance between Orthodox Judaism, on one hand, and feminism, on the other, Greenberg wrote a new kind of Orthodox rebbetzin's story: her narrative was honest and confessional, never preachy or moralizing. The path toward considering feminism was likely made easier for many readers because of Greenberg's own convincing attachment to Orthodoxy. In 1981, "feminist" was still a dirty word, often associated with man-hating, and an aversion for traditional family life. Not so in Greenberg's telling: "On those bitter cold Sabbath mornings I was absolutely delighted to linger an hour longer in a nice warm bed and play with the kids rather than to have to brave the elements," Greenberg confessed of her life as an Orthodox Jewish mother. "I could choose to go to the synagogue when I wanted or pray at home when I wanted; for my husband there was no choice" (25).

With its narrative of change in Greenberg's own attitude and in Judaism, *On Women and Judaism* was subtly inspirational. The engagement of Judaism and feminism offered a challenge that Greenberg portrayed as nearly irresistible to those who cared about religion: "new heights to scale, a deeper sense of maturity, and an enlarged scope of responsibility for oneself, society, and the continuity of tradition" (37). Indeed, the book became a guide for those hoping to navigate between Judaism and newer movements for freedom. Nowhere did that come through as strongly as in her dictum, "Where there's a rabbinic will, there's a *halakhic* way." Judaism included a tradition of change and the profound ability to assimilate new ideas. The key would be to draw on feminism in thoughtful ways, and with ultimate concern for welfare of Judaism. With *On Women and Judaism*, Blu Greenberg came to embody that goal for Jews at the turn of the twenty-first century.