

**Ross, Tamar. *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism*.  
Waltham MA: Brandeis University Press; University Press of New England:  
Hanover and London, 2004.**

Reviewed by Lynne Bundesen, Santa Fe, New Mexico

“Of course, Orthodox Jewish women are not allowed to talk without permission of their husbands”, said the 60-something, Roman Catholic school raised, Harvard educated lawyer at a recent seminar of a dozen other highly educated men and women. No one disputed her until I said, “Wherever did you hear that? I am in the process of reading a book on Orthodoxy and Feminism and besides what happens to unmarried Orthodox women—are they mute forever?”

Sigh.

We all, people, have so many misconceptions that one wonders how anyone gets through a day. But we soldier on. *Expanding the Palace of Torah* by Tamar Ross helps weave our way through the myriad misconceptions, histories and arguments on women and Torah, and we are the richer for tackling the book and engaging our thought with some basic questions on Torah, feminism and time. Since not all feminists think alike, since not all people interpret or read Torah in the same way and, since few but Einstein and some sages and saints have a clue about time we are in interesting and disputative territory with Ross’s book.

Is revelation fixed or cumulative Ross asks? That question convulses Christianity as well as Judaism and Islam. “Is it at all possible to distinguish between form and essence?”

That metaphysical question has been asked for thousands of years. Ross begins her questioning by parsing out, as she sees the situation, feminism and Halakhic tradition.

Women’s place in this tradition-begun Ross states in the first five centuries of the Common Era and to this day, subordinate women in the eyes of the law: unequal obligation to perform mitzvot, restriction upon women in the public domain, women’s dependence on personal and family status, in equality in marriage and divorce laws.

Ross states clearly that she is highly influenced by Rav Kook and this quote from his work appears in her book before the listing of the table of contents: *And in general, this is an important rule in the struggle of ideas: we should not automatically feel obliged to refute any idea that comes to contradict something in the Torah, but rather we should build the palace of Torah above it. In so doing we reach a more exalted level, and through this exaltation the ideas are clarified. And thereafter, when we are not pressured by anything, we can confidently fight on Torah’s behalf.*

(Iggerot Hareayah)

Having stated the first step is to acknowledge the problem, Ross moves on—in 20 pages—to A Brief History of Discontent on Gender Issues throughout the Ages and the Conservative Response. A

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following chapter asks the question “Does Positivism Work?” Ross then addresses Revisionism, Halakhic Proactivism before moving into Part Four: Beyond the Third Stage: Expanding the Palace of Torah. The short form of her argument seems to be that there is tension between existing Halakhic reality and a new narrative—that “Modern Orthodox women are affected by modern consciousness and are confident that new ways will be found to accommodate our emerging narrative into the meaning of Torah, incorporating the feminist vision of a different future.”

That statement alone is food for enough discussion to feed for a lifetime. With 55 pages of Notes and 16 pages of index, *Expanding the Palace of Torah* is challenging to those not at all familiar with Orthodox Judaism, Feminism, Halakhic law and tradition and, the discussions and articles on those intertwined themes that have been going on long enough to have Ross talk in terms of “third-stage feminism.” Her book is certainly necessary for any respectable library to own for perhaps, any Jewish woman’s book club to require as reading--whether it is your type of bedside reading or not is another matter.

My own inclination—one woman’s proclivity—is to question some of the rabbinic tradition as Ross states it on page 14 that “male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27) “appear to affirm and support the existence of two separate and clearly distinct genders in a hierarchical relationship.” One can certainly read that verse to mean simultaneous creation with the female last as the higher form?

I also question Ross’s premise that “The beginnings of feminism can be traced to the industrial revolution and the move to draw labor out of the home and into the public workplace. Its initial impact was felt among married, middle-class women, the first to find themselves left at home with little productive work to do”—hence Mary Wollstonecraft’s, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. There is something rather Marxist/Capitalistic something Highly Material about that thesis that, to this reader, undermines an inspired view, a spiritual view of how thought emerges to light through the ages. I am left empty by the premise that the Industrial Revolution brought on “feminism” - particularly in the light of the biblically recorded lives of the seven women prophets of Israel—let’s have a cheer for Sarah, Miriam, Hannah, Devorah, Abigail, Huldah, Esther and perhaps and the last prophet mentioned in the Bible, Noahdiah (Nehemiah 6:14) was a woman.

Ross’s opening line in her book is: “I never used to think of myself as a feminist.” None of us did-did we? - and God knows we all have a long way to go to figure out what that means other than we want a direct relationship to the Creator? Ross, to her credit, does tackle the issue and in her efforts we are the richer.

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