"I Don't Know Enough:" Jewish Women's Learned Ignorance

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My dear and beloved sons, I do not need to urge you to give proper education to your sons, for I know that of your own accord you will educate them in Torah and piety. Yet I command you that you should command your sons, and they theirs, that they should be careful not to teach their daughters Torah...

Thus said the Ridwas, a famous and highly respected rabbi, in his last will and testament, published in 1908 (quoted in Karp, 1987, p. 176). Such is the cultural and religious heritage that still prevails in ultra-Orthodox circles and that still has an impact on the feelings and behavior of many Jewish women, even when they are far removed from the direct influence of such patriarchal dictums.

I have heard "I really don't know enough," or some variant of that phrase, at every conference of Jewish women, almost every time a Jewish woman gets up to speak of Jewish matters. At the 1992 First International Conference on Judaism, Feminism, and Psychology in Seattle, it was an opening remark that punctuated informal conversations in the hallways, as well as formal presentations and workshop discussions. I realized that I too, whether I voiced it or not, had a similar feeling of not being really entitled to my opinions or observations because I was not sufficiently steeped in Jewish texts. I have become aware of my own anxiety about speaking on the topic of Jewish women's issues, and I have realized that my sense of not knowing enough is not unique to me but is shared by other Jewish women. This may, in fact, be central to understanding certain element in the lives of Jewish women today.

The male-centered North American culture is one of many cultures that teach women and girls, Jewish and non-Jewish, to feel insecure about speaking up. In addition however, Jewish women are exposed to specifically Jewish pressures that increase our discomfort about learning, knowing, and speaking of Jewish matters. Jewish women's collective sense of not knowing enough has many roots and manifests itself in many forms. It could well be called Jewish women's "learned ignorance." We have learned to remain ignorant for several, sometimes opposite, reasons. Chief among these is a Jewish tradition of keeping women out of the male bastions of Jewish learning and synagogue ritual, a tradition that has only begun to be questioned and open to change within my lifetime, starting timidly in the 1950s, and more vigorously since the 1970s. Jewish studies have traditionally not been available to women, and references to Jewish women's topics within Jewish tradition and literature have been few. Those of us who have grown up within or close to Jewish observance or culture have received repeated messages about Jewish women's exclusion from Jewish learning and only a few of us have had access to the more recently available advanced levels of Jewish studies.

Our ignorance may also reflect a resistance to Jewish learning that reflects the sadness and anger of not having been allowed or expected to learn. Our childhood experiences with Jewish education are widely diverse. For many of us, the issue is not that we were excluded by Jewish men, but that we were never
exposed to Jewish knowledge at all, for it was not part of our parent's way of life. Others have had
sketchy or negative learning experiences, frequently ending abruptly after Bat Mitzvah.

There is much more to this learned ignorance than the question of access to Jewish education. Much as
we would like to know more, we may have also shied away from Jewish learning for a variety of self-
protective reasons. Our avoidance is grounded in part on two problematic issues. The first is that Jewish
learning of necessity evokes all the painful and complicated feelings of belonging to an oppressed and
persecuted people; the second is that Jewish history and tradition are so thoroughly male centered that
many Jewish women find it distasteful to even begin the study of Jewish texts.

Our sense of not knowing enough is never absolute and depends somewhat on our own frame of
reference. We may feel more ignorant than we actually are, especially when we make the common
mistake of assuming that Orthodox Judaism is the only and true measure of Jewishness, when in fact
only 10% of American Jews consider themselves Orthodox.

Furthermore, Jewish women's issues have far too often not been welcomed or included among non-
Jewish or mixed audiences, even when the discourse is intended to be "multicultural", or in earlier days,
when the well meant use of the Christian term "ecumenical" often did not include Jewish. Our ingrained
sense of learned ignorance embodies the multiple dimensions of "otherness" that so many of us
experience as Jews in a world that is predominantly non-Jewish, and as Jewish women in a Jewish
world that is defined and dominated by Jewish men.

Among non-Jews, I learned not to draw attention to my otherness, my Jewishness, out of fear of anti-
Jewish responses that could shatter the illusion of temporary privilege or acceptance and even endanger
my family or the Jewish community. I knew that it took only a minor incident to turn the non-Jewish
population into a life threatening mob, intent on blaming Jews for conditions such as plague, poverty,
and general unrest, even in countries that tolerated a Jewish presence and where Jews had achieved a
measure of acceptance or prominence.

Jewish women carry the double fear of anti-Jewish as well as anti-female reactions. Like Jews, women
have always been the other. Like Jews, women have always been the targets of societal blame. Like
Jews, women have been silenced by the fear of losing privilege, or of provoking ridicule, harassment,
and violence. Nora Gold's chapter in this volume gives examples of the discounting and trivializing that
Jewish women encounter when we try to bring up Jewish topics.

Whenever I speak of Jewish matters to a mixed audience, or of Jewish women's issues to a Jewish
audience, I am somewhat on guard. Do I know enough to appear knowledgeable? Will my words be
questioned, discounted, perceived as unsubstantiated generalizations or exaggerations, or attributed to
my own wounds or pathologies? The attack may not even come from men or from non-Jews. It is just
as likely to come from Jewish women who do not wish to apply a feminist lens to Jewish customs, who
do not want to hear yet one more litany of Jewish pain, or who simply find it difficult to attribute
legitimacy or authority to a woman's voice and therefore find it easy to criticize or to disagree. I also
fear that I might embarrass my Jewish sisters by saying something that could trigger a subtle anti-
Jewish response or be perceived as being too loud, too pushy, too whiny, too Jewish.

It seems to me that our learned ignorance is an important aspect of our day-to-day lives as Jewish
women today, emerging under many circumstances and most forcefully when we participate in the
rituals traditionally reserved for men. I suggest that it is such an integral part of our personality, that it
may well inhibit other areas of knowledge and of discourse. This sense of not knowing and not being
allowed to know, or to speak as if we know, is a key element in the Jewish ambivalence that plagues so
many Jewish American and Jewish Canadian feminists today.

Collective and yet unique for each of us, the concept of learned ignorance bears some resemblance to
the concept of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975). As with learned helplessness, we get double
messages. Since Adam and Eve, the Jewish messages against female learning have been consistent. In
order to be good Jewish women, we are expected to remain ignorant and speechless in Jewish matters,
and yet, we are also expected to know enough so that we can convey Jewish culture and traditions to future generations. If we don't know enough about our Jewish heritage, we may feel stupid and excluded. Our relation to Jewish knowledge or its absence is a very personal matter. As a Jewish woman among non-Jews, I learned that it was okay to speak of many things, as long as I did not bring Jewish topics into the discourse or use Jewish mannerisms. How then can I speak at all? And how can I dare to speak of Jewish issues in a non-Jewish environment when the history of my people has taught me that it is dangerous to become visible, it is dangerous to be heard, it is dangerous to make waves as a Jew.

And yet, and yet, it is absolutely essential that I, an Alte Yiddene, a Jewish American woman in her 70s, gather the courage to overcome these hesitations, to grapple with these taboos. It is essential that I speak out of my own experience, that I write, that I encourage other Jewish women to speak and to write of their own experience. While none of us can assume to represent all Jewish women, our individual accounts can begin to form a body of knowledge about Jewish women that conveys the importance of who we are and what we know.

My story has to do with being the daughter of Lithuanian Jewish parents, born in Berlin, educated in Switzerland and then becoming a Jewish immigrant among American-born Jews. It is about carrying the pain and insecurities of my particular Jewish childhood into adult life and eventually transforming and integrating those early experiences by means of feminist consciousness and feminist analysis. To some extent, every Jewish woman has to deal with similar elements in her own Jewish story, though the particulars of her story may be very different.
felt this way, when I read Nora Gold's account in "Ima's Not on the Bima" (Gold, 1995), and Michele Clark's chapter in this volume.

Jewish women today are permitted to say the blessings over the Torah, and to read from the Torah in most synagogues, with exception of the Orthodox. Yet I continue to get very anxious when I stand before the open Torah scroll, and I have to remind myself not only that I know the words but that I actually have the right to know the words.

This early image of not knowing, and not being allowed or expected to know, is a very powerful one and one that I believe holds the key to my relationship toward Jewish religion and Jewish community. I have vacillated over the years between wanting in and wanting out. I have expressed my ambivalence at times by compulsive over-involvement and at other times by half-heartedness, but I have never withdrawn entirely as some Jewish women have. I see no contradiction in wanting access to the male privileges of Jewish ritual and wanting to feminize the very same ritual by bringing female wisdom and consciousness into it. I believe that much of my adult development as a Jewish woman can be traced back to the childhood experience of wanting to belong and to be Jewishly knowledgeable, not on male-defined terms but on my terms, while also wanting to be fully accepted as a Jewish woman outside of the Jewish community.

Much like women in other spheres of male dominance, having partly achieved some of those goals I then began to question the words that I had been excluded from saying all those years. As I learned more, I became aware of my aversion to the sexist, hierarchical, and vengeful messages that are embedded in Jewish texts. I began to ask myself whether this was what I really wanted to perpetuate. The question that emerged was whether it is possible to retain the positive elements of Jewish teachings, while reframing or rejecting the objectionable elements. In answer to that question, I have fought for the inclusion of women in Jewish prayer, in Jewish institutions, and in Jewish communal leadership; at the same time I have initiated changes in the text and challenged the status quo.

The ignorance that was imposed on generations of Jewish women has been partly overcome within my own lifetime. I am deeply moved when my daughter chants the story of Jonah in fluent Hebrew during the Yom Kippur service, I am delighted with the ease and familiarity with which two of my granddaughters approach religious services and traditions, while my third granddaughter confidently writes about her evolving Jewish identity. I am impressed with the scholarship of women rabbis of my daughter's generation, I am in awe and somewhat envious of the younger women of my congregation who lead the service and chant from the Torah with confidence and competence. I take great pleasure in the emergence of secular as well as religious publications by and about Jewish women.

However, much like other advances attributed to the women's movement, we've got a long way to go. The institutional changes are far from universal and often have the quality of crazy-making illusions, being only superficial, while the basic attitudes and behaviors have hardly changed at all. In Jerusalem a recent court order forbids women to pray together or to read from the Torah at the Wailing Wall. In Rachel Weber's chapter in this volume, she gives a poignant example of her encounter with a supposedly egalitarian minyan, when instead of being counted as the tenth Jew, she was asked to babysit for one of the men so that he could take her place. We are not so far removed as we would like to think from the attitude expressed by Rabbi Yosef Wolf (quoted in Kadish, 1994), founder of the ultra-orthodox Beit Yakov School for girls in Israel: "If we succeed in instilling in our girl students that the purpose of their studies is to aspire to emulate our matriarchs, who did not study, than we have succeeded in educating our daughters." (italics mine) (p. 29).

This shocking statement is of course not typical of the attitudes of Jewish educators in America today, and yet, vestiges of the taboo against female learning are still in our psyches and in the strongholds of Orthodox male authority. Our wonderful new Jewish role models - women rabbis, scholars, and activists - do not yet operate from a well-established power base; their voices, even at full strength, are isolated solos, easily drowned out by their male counterparts. Their work is likely not to be read or quoted by the men who still control Jewish learning.
Much like other oppressed groups, we have unfortunately internalized the negative attitudes of the dominant group toward Jews and toward women. In many cases, this causes us to feel ambivalent about acting, speaking, or being Jewish. How much more so when we feel insecure in knowing our Jewish heritage. The ambivalence and the wish to avoid being noticed can cause us to turn against each other and to feel threatened by the differences among us. I believe that this profound ambivalence, based partly on learned ignorance and female exclusion within Judaism, and partly on negative stereotyping and persecution from the non-Jewish majority, is a feeling that is probably shared by many Jewish women. It is an ambivalence not only toward religious expression but also toward our Jewish identity and toward our place in the non-Jewish world, often causing splits in our own identities or in our relationships with other Jews. We may reject or blame our own Jewish background, thus denying an important aspect of our own identity, or we may reject and blame other Jews as we struggle to maintain our own Jewish equilibrium.

In spite of the negative internal and external climate of discouragement, Jewish women are beginning to make our Jewish voices heard. Feminist Jewish study groups and Rosh Chodesh groups are flourishing. Jewish women are introducing new areas of Jewish study that focus on women. We are sharing our enthusiasm at international, national, and regional conferences, exploring and legitimizing our issues and concerns, appreciating the differences among us.

We have established vibrant Jewish Caucuses at the National Women's Studies Association and at the Association for Women in Psychology, bringing Jewish topics into feminist discourse. Lilith Magazine and BRIDGES, the first independent Jewish women's publications not affiliated with any religious or philanthropic organization, are contributing to our fund of knowledge about Jewish women. Jewish women have become rabbis, Jewish scholars and teachers, bringing respect and status to Jewish women's academic studies and acting as role models. Our Jewish women's voices are changing the very face and texture of contemporary Jewish life by claiming our rights to Jewish learning and leadership.

We have begun to speak out of our own and unique Jewish experiences and our own wisdom. Our truths may not conform to a male-determined body of Jewish knowledge, and we may not agree on a unified body of female Jewish knowledge. But we have begun to understand ourselves as Jewish women and to know each other. We have begun to show that Jewish knowledge can and should legitimately include the essential topics of women's lives. Our studies and conversations can be focused on our own experiences as Jewish women and need not be limited to the traditional and male dominated areas of Jewish learning.

Our present task is to help each other overcome the learned ignorance and the learned silencing of our past. We are bringing our Jewishness into the foreground and, as Evelyn Torton Beck says in her chapter in this volume, each of us is "searching for our authentic Jewishness." The silence is no longer necessary, the taboos are no longer effective. We might find that we are not as ignorant as we think. We are never too old to learn.

It is time to sing shehehyanu. Let us rejoice together for we have given birth to a new field of Jewish study that places Jewish women at the center. Let us celebrate the beauty of women's voices affirming the varied ways of Jewish knowing.

**Introductory Note**

Rachel Josefowitz Siegel, M.S.W. is a loud, proud Jewish mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. Recently retired from her feminist therapy private practice, she now has more time to write, travel, and visit with friends and family. She has co-edited *Seen but not Heard: Jewish Women in Therapy* with Ellen Cole and *Women Changing Therapy* with Joan Hamerman Robbins, and has written numerous articles on women over 60, and on Jewish women. She continues to lecture and lead workshops on women's issues. A wandering Jew of Ashkenazi background, she is an active and activist member of her synagogue, and feels most at home in an egalitarian or feminist conservative environment.
References


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