It is all the more difficult to address a contemporary phenomenon in historical terms when the historian in question has been a participant in the process she seeks to analyze. I am an engaged participant-observer of American Jewish feminism, and my reflections are the interpretation of a historian sensitive to feminist theory but, like most historians, eclectic in method and approach.

American Jewish feminism is about twenty years old. Its pioneers were largely well-educated young women deeply influenced by general feminist currents of the time. American feminism both provided evidence of the subordination of women in patriarchal cultures and championed a vision of equality between the sexes. Feminists who were deeply rooted in Judaism and Jewish culture recognized the applicability of the feminist cultural critique to their own heritage and community and proceeded to revision a Jewish community in which they could participate fully beyond the domestic sphere.

What we did not realize then was that we had predecessors. As recent historical scholarship has documented, for several generations American Jewish women had struggled to claim a place in Jewish communal life and to expand their possibilities for religious education and self-expression. Because Sunday School education and some forms of American philanthropy in the nineteenth century were considered appropriate to the female sex, middle-class
American Jewish women devoted themselves to the social housekeeping of their Jewish communities.¹ Through the national organizations that they created—the National Council of Jewish Women in 1893 and Hadassah in 1912—they asserted the right to place certain issues, such as white slavery, on the agenda of the Jewish community, to administer their own social welfare projects, even in the face of opposition from male communal leaders, and to develop their own political positions.² The early leaders of the National Council of Jewish Women also established their local chapters and programs with the aim of enhancing the Jewish knowledge of their members so that they could properly carry out their responsibility as agents of the transmission of Judaism to the younger generation.³ In the Reform and Conservative movements the national associations of synagogue sisterhoods also did more than decorate the sanctuary for festivals and pour tea for congregants at Oneg Shabbats. Their leaders also called for increased participation of women in the ritual life of the synagogue.⁴ The recovery of the past history of American Jewish women is itself one of the marks of the ongoing impact of feminism upon Jewish communal life, in this case upon Jewish scholarship.

Under the impact of the new American feminism, Jewish feminists of the 1970s forged a program that was based on concepts of gender equality more far reaching than any previously articulated by American Jewish women.⁵ The earliest demands of Jewish feminists focused on questions of equalizing the status of women within Judaism, opening positions of power to them, and redressing the injustices that women suffered because of the patriarchal assumptions of halakhah. Thus, the small New York group that called itself Ezrat Nashim—perhaps the first contemporary Jewish feminist group to concern itself with religious as well as secular issues—publicly called upon the Conservative movement in 1972 to count women in the minyan and enable them to participate fully in public religious life, to train women to be rabbis and cantors, to encourage them to assume leadership roles in the synagogue and community, and to permit them to serve as witnesses and to initiate divorce. Recognizing that many of the halakhic disabilities that women experienced stemmed from their exemption from some mitzvot, Ezrat Nashim’s “Call for Change” also asked for equal obliga-
tion of women in Jewish law.⁶ The background statement accompanying Ezrat Nashim’s press release declared that the group had come to the realization that change in the status of women in Judaism “could be brought about only through the concerted effort on the part of women such as ourselves to bring pressure upon American Jewish institutions.”⁷ Ezrat Nashim’s manifesto drew upon the rhetoric of contemporary feminism; and the message of self-empowerment of the first stages of 1970s feminism spurred the ten women of Ezrat Nashim, the female activists of the North American Jewish Students’ Network (who organized the Jewish Feminist conferences of 1973 and 1974), and numerous other Jewish women meeting in consciousness-raising groups to engage in political lobbying on behalf of the feminist agenda.

The message of early Jewish feminism fell upon a receptive community. Middle-class American Jews were sympathetic to ideologies that utilized a liberal discourse of egalitarianism and pluralism; they were aware that their own claim to equality in the modern world drew upon the premises of liberalism. Furthermore, they were urban and urbane, and more highly educated than the general American population. They were particularly sensitive to charges of discrimination and amenable to changes that could be made, at least at first, through symbolic actions rather than a real transfer of power.

There were specific factors in the development of American Judaism and in the character of Jewish feminism that facilitated the extraordinarily rapid achievement of most of the feminist goals enunciated in the early 1970s. The introduction of mixed seating in the Reform and Conservative synagogue and the promotion of equality of education for boys and girls in both denominations set the stage for greater participation by women in synagogue ritual. The sacred space of the non-Orthodox American synagogue had long been at least partly degendered, and the dismissal of women on the grounds that they were Jewishly unlearned could not be sustained in movements that had equally low educational expectations for children and adults of both sexes. Significantly, the appeal of Ezrat Nashim to the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly was all the more effective because the members of the group represented the elite youth of the movement. As the women of Ezrat Nashim
stated in their “Call for Change,” “To educate women and deny them the opportunity to act from this knowledge is an affront to their intelligence, talents and integrity. As products of . . . the Ramah camps, LTF [Leaders’ Training Fellowship], USY [United Synagogue Youth], and the [Jewish Theological] Seminary, we feel this tension acutely.” In the Reform movement, which disregarded halakhic constraints, the logic of mixed seating and equal education led to the decision to admit women to rabbinic school in the late 1960s, before a Jewish feminist movement had crystallized. Sally Priesand was ordained as the first female American rabbi in 1972.

In addition to their elite education, Jewish feminist activists also displayed a profound commitment to Judaism and the Jewish community that differentiated them from secular feminists of Jewish background. Not only did they focus their attention upon the Jewish community, but they also avoided the radical rejection of religious tradition that characterized some secular and Christian feminists. While Mary Daly, teaching at a Catholic college, developed her concept of women’s “Exodus communities” that ultimately led her to break completely with the Church, Jewish feminists affirmed our Jewishness and rejected the notion of a static tradition whose sexism was fundamental to its message. Because our identity was grounded as much in our religio-ethnic consciousness as in our gender, Jewish feminists were always conscious of the need to function within the Jewish community, even as we dissented from some of its behavior and ideology.

The focus on the community rather than the individual as the necessary locus for change facilitated the early, and ongoing, successes of American Jewish feminism. Jewish feminists also benefited, of course, from the fact that any ten adults can form a religious community and that there exists no ecclesiastical control over American Jewish life. The decentralization and localism of Jewish religious and communal affairs enabled Jewish feminists to press for change at the grass-roots level even as they addressed some issues in national institutions. It also enabled Orthodox feminists to meet their passionate need to approach the Torah directly in worship by establishing their own local tefillah (prayer) groups, sometimes with the support of sympathetic local rabbis, without
having to confront directly the formidable opposition of the Orthodox rabbinic establishment. Some have faulted Jewish feminism for having failed to institutionalize itself, but one can argue in rebuttal that the localism and diversity of Jewish feminism have provided flexibility, enabling feminist activists to match their strategies to local needs and to gain adherents in a variety of communal institutional settings.

The mechanisms that Jewish feminists have chosen to present issues have also proven effective. The various baby-naming ceremonies for girls are a case in point. Meeting a felt need to welcome daughters into the Jewish covenantal community with the same excitement that greets newborn sons, the new rituals, which borrowed liturgically from the *brit milah* (circumcision) ceremony, were disseminated through a variety of means. In the early 1970s, those who participated in the new ceremonies, which were always held amidst a crowd of family and friends, often passed word of the new rite along to others and sought copies of ceremonies to use when their own daughters were born.

Self-consciously seeking to create new rituals that, perhaps paradoxically, drew upon traditional Jewish themes, feminist parents published accounts of the rationales for their ritual innovation and for the traditional elements they had adapted. As a highly educated and Jewishly literate group with connections to the Jewish counterculture of the late 1960s, they had access to such media as *Response* and the *Jewish Catalogues*; Ezrat Nashim even created, and made available at low cost, a small pamphlet of feminist baby-naming ceremonies (as well as a study guide and pamphlet of readings on women and Judaism). So widespread among committed Jews was the perception of injustice in the traditional response to the birth of boys and girls that some Orthodox parents, who found the new rituals too innovative for their taste, still developed welcoming ceremonies for daughters (even though the infant was not formally named or entered into the covenant through them) or adopted the Sephardi custom of the *seder zeved ha-bat* (celebration for the gift of a daughter). Sympathetic rabbis introduced the new rituals to their colleagues and congregants. Thus, a combination of informal networking and energetic dissemination of material in print served to introduce and legitimate a feminist ritual. A similar
process, though on a smaller scale, occurred in the phenomenon of the adult bat mitzvah, in which a new rite was created to mark symbolically within a religious community grown women's assertion of their new-found equal status in the synagogue.\(^{15}\)

Although the original feminist impulse originated outside the institutional framework of the organized Jewish community, supporters of equality for women were present at all levels within the institutions of the Reform and Conservative movements as well as within nonreligious Jewish communal organizations. Moreover, because of their rootedness within the Jewish community, Jewish feminist leaders were welcomed as speakers at synagogues and meetings of Jewish women's groups throughout the country. One of the first acts of the short-lived Jewish Feminist Organization, founded in 1974 in the wake of the second Jewish Feminist Conference, was the establishment of a speakers' bureau. Jewish feminists have also found a ready audience for the scholarly and popular literature that they have produced; feminist issues have been discussed regularly in Jewish magazines and journals, and feminists have succeeded in publishing the magazine \textit{Lilith}, albeit somewhat irregularly, since 1976. The bibliography of writing on Jewish women and on women and Judaism in the past two decades is most impressive, especially in comparison with the paucity of material on those subjects in the preceding century.\(^{16}\)

With the passage of time, feminists increasingly achieved positions of influence within important Jewish institutions. Less than twelve years after Ezrat Nashim presented its "Call for Change" to the Conservative movement, for example, two of its original members, Judith Hauptman and I, by then faculty members of the Jewish Theological Seminary, were able to take part in the vote to admit women to the movement's rabbinical school. Although the Association for Jewish Studies was established some twenty years ago by an all-male group of Judaic scholars, it now includes an active women's caucus of more than seventy-five members that, among other things, organizes panels for the association's annual conference. Many women staff local federations and their agencies, though generally at middle-management levels, and for the first time a woman, Shoshana Cardin, has served as president of the Council of Jewish Federations. The Union of American Hebrew
Congregations has had a Task Force on the Equality of Women in Judaism for many years, and the several hundred women who serve as rabbis and cantors in the Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative movements play an active role in their professional societies. In Reform and Conservative synagogues women increasingly serve as members of the board and as presidents. This "infiltration" of feminists has served to raise women's issues quietly, and effectively, behind doors as well as prominently in public forums. An "old girls network" has taken its place alongside its male counterpart, thereby opening up the Jewish community to new perspectives.

Perhaps most important, through the activity of anonymous supporters, both female and male, of the feminist agenda of equal opportunity, the shape of the Jewish community has been transformed. For most Jews, a new social reality has eroded the psychological resistance that was the initial response to feminist innovation. In Reform temples and in Reconstructionist and the majority of Conservative synagogues, women participate fully in the ritual. My teenage daughters, graduates of day schools and regulars at shul, have lived their entire lives in an environment that takes gender equality for granted. Their peers, although they may be less observant or Jewishly educated, know that women can be rabbis and cantors, that the Torah is equally the heritage of women and men.

Although most Orthodox Jews reject feminist ideology, feminism has had an impact nonetheless in many sectors of the American Orthodox community. Most Orthodox rabbis have reacted with apologetics, scorn, or vituperation to the feminist critique of Judaism and its assertion of women's need for, and right to, equal access to Jewish learning, public religious expression, and leadership. In some Orthodox communities resistance to feminism—signaled by the raising of mechitsas and the lowering of sleeves—has become a benchmark of true piety. Yet the challenge of feminism has spurred moderate Orthodox rabbis like Saul Berman to explore the possibilities within the bounds of halakhah for enhanced participation of women in public ritual and for redress of the suffering of the agunah (chained wife). It has led to increased emphasis upon advanced (albeit separate and gender-specific) Jewish education for women within Orthodox schools, even as Orthodox leaders denounce femi-
nism. Just as feminist-inspired celebrations to mark the birth of a daughter have won acceptance in modern Orthodox communities, so, too, many girls in those communities mark their entry into adulthood with a bat mitzvah rite. Although the Orthodox bat mitzvah ceremony may be limited to a *devar Torah* (brief Torah lesson) delivered by the celebrant after conclusion of the formal religious services, still the girl coming of age has an opportunity to develop and display her learning and to be celebrated for it. Finally, the persistence of women's *tefillah* groups, even in the face of strong opposition, demonstrates the importance for some Orthodox women of the powerful experience of reading from the Torah and raising their voices together in prayer.

The issues of equal access represent only the first stage of Jewish feminism. From the late 1970s the feminist critique of Judaism has suggested that Judaism itself needed to be refashioned. Feminists argued that the Jewish tradition transmitted from one generation to another in the form of classical texts was incomplete, for it included no women's voices. The task of this generation was to create a woman's midrash, that is, to interpret the gamut of Jewish texts through the prism of women's experience. Feminists have also suggested the need to create new Jewish liturgies that reimaged God (in addition to modifying God-language) and that developed a new Jewish theology.19

On these profound, and more radical, issues Jewish feminists, for a variety of reasons, have had less success than on issues of equal access. First, there is no consensus among feminists themselves as to the necessity of the envisioned changes. Supporters of equal access, such as Arthur Green, the former president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, have dissented from some of the experimental creativity that accompanies the development of a feminist Judaism.20 Second, whereas communal support for egalitarianism remains strong, many Jews fear radical change in the nature of Judaism. Even those who do not share the theological premises of traditional Judaism may remain emotionally attached to traditional liturgy. Other American Jews, perhaps the majority, do not take Judaism as a religion seriously enough to struggle with the feminist call for its redefinition. On this theological and liturgical
ground the perceived need for innovation clashes with the power of authenticity embedded in Jewish tradition. Finally, although feminists are prominent within the full spectrum of Jewish institutional life, for the most part the proponents of radical change in Judaism remain outside the central organizations of American Jewry. Indeed, they have introduced many of their liturgical innovations in small, often separatist women’s communities; as yet, these innovations have not had much impact within the larger Jewish community.

No analysis of the impact of Jewish feminism, as well as its prospects for the future, would be complete without consideration of the resistance to change within the American Jewish community. The reluctance of some congregations to hire women rabbis, particularly as senior rabbis in large congregations or in the more prestigious pulpits, bespeaks a deep ambivalence about women in positions of authority. For some American Jews it is easier to accept women as cantors than as rabbis, because cantors are seen as subordinate religious functionaries. I have heard colleagues speak with horror about the “feminization” of the rabbinate and its consequent decline in status, even though women now comprise at least a third of students in such prestigious fields as law and medicine. Although women have entered Jewish communal service in large numbers, they continue to be clustered in the lower ranks and in middle management. Only a tiny percentage have attained the position of executive director of federations.21

Most disturbingly, many communal spokesmen continue to posit an inherent conflict between feminism and Jewish survival. From the middle of the nineteenth century, Jewish leaders have held women, especially mothers, responsible for defections from Judaism and the Jewish community, even though radical assimilation was far more common among males than females.22 That tendency to project onto women communal guilt regarding assimilation continues, though in a muted form, when Jewish communal spokesmen attribute to women virtually sole responsibility for Jewish survival and criticize them alone for seeking self-fulfillment at the expense of Jewish communal goals.

The feminist task that confronts American Jewry as it prepares for the twenty-first century is less obvious than was the challenge
of two decades ago. It calls for the sharing of power, and not merely equal access to the entry level of Jewish communal leadership, both lay and rabbinic. It necessitates confronting the challenges of liturgical change and accepting greater diversity of religious expression than American Jews have previously felt comfortable with. Most important, it requires a recognition that the struggle to define, and attain, equality is never permanently accomplished.

Notes


3. Rogow, *Gone to Another Meeting*, 14, 20–21, 23–24, 59–72; and Sue Levi Elwell, "The Founding and Early Programs of the National Council of Jewish Women: Study and Practice as Jewish Women's Religious Expression" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1982).


10. Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation (Boston: Beacon, 1973).
14. Examples of both may be found in the Ezrat Nashim pamphlet.
16. On the resources available to Jewish feminists, on central issues of their concern, and for a selected bibliography, see Schneider, Jewish and Female.

