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Putting Women Back in the Picture: A Celebration

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Scroll of Honor Essay by Carol Kaufman Newman

חלום חלמתי ואיני יודע מה הוא
I've dreamt a dream, and I don't know what
it means. (*Talmud Brakhot 55b*)

This wasn't my dream; it was Blu Greenberg's I'm talking about. I like to say that I was there at the birth of JOFA—actually I was there at the conception. Blu had a dream, a conference of Orthodox women to talk about expanding their spiritual, ritual and intellectual roles within the framework of halakha. Her wonderful friend, Esther Farber *a"h*, brought my sister into the mix and my sister corralled me. The conference exceeded expectations. We ran out of chairs. People sat on the floor, hung from the rafters. The highlight: One woman saying to another—I thought I was the only one who felt this way.

חלום חלמתי ואיני יודע מה הוא

The dream: Part Two. Blu brought a group of us together and said we should form an organization devoted to the goals of the conference. And, she said, let's hope that in a few years we will have accomplished all our goals and be out of business.

And one evening, surrounded by a group of like-minded incredible women, our young lawyer, Laura Shaw Frank, read us the articles of incorporation and we voted unanimously to accept them. JOFA was born.

Those early years are a fond memory. Those of us on the executive committee met once a week in Riverdale around the table in Blu's kitchen or dining room. There, I might add, our *fabrenta* feminist leader served us hot cereal as we debated our future. And what debates! We thought we could bring a systemic solution to the *agunah* travesty. We were told by some rabbis that the solutions are there, and we just needed rabbis who would study and use them. We thought, naively, that if we got a group of rabbis together and talked around my dining room table and charged them with the task they would make it happen. We were wrong. Not only were we powerless to make change, but we were unable to get the rabbis to come together to discuss change. We thought that we could promote women in leadership roles. That, too, has been difficult. Some rabbis called us pagans. Others used the argument of *tсениut*, modesty. They say

it is immodest for women to take on leadership roles. Some of these same rabbis will not allow a *yoetzet halakha* in their synagogues. It is better to bring the intimate questions of *niddah* to a male authority. The spokesperson for *Agudas Yisrael* says women rabbis *demean* women. I quote: “Whether ordaining Orthodox women violates a specific halakha is unimportant. It’s still wrong.” *Is there a halakhaic issue with women and leadership? Agudas Yisrael* argues that the *Shulhan Arukh* doesn’t say that you *can’t* put a cat in an *aron kodesh*, but we know it isn’t right. If you recall a number of years ago another rabbi was furious that a woman would read a *ketubah* at a wedding. Well, he said, it’s not that it’s a halakhaic prohibition—even a monkey can read a *ketubah*.

חלום חלמתי ואיני יודע מה הואWe had a dream and we didn’t know what it would bring....

Sadly we are not yet out of business. But we *have* accomplished a lot. A *simhat bat* ceremony to welcome the birth of a girl is given now in most communities. And the celebration of a *bat mitzvah* is catching on even in *hareidi* homes. JOFA publishes *Shema beKolah*, divrei Torah written and edited by women. The JOFA Journal, each issue covering a specific topic, is read by over 5,000 people and is being used by study groups and as part of school curricula. We have begun a series of halakhaic source guides on topics relating to women, *Ta Shma*. The first three are “May Women Touch a Torah Scroll,” “Women’s Obligation in Kiddush of Shabbat,” and “A Daughter’s Recitation of Kaddish”—with others to follow. We published our first book: *Women and Men in Communal Prayer: A Halakhaic Perspective* written by Rabbi Daniel Sperber and Rabbi Mendel Shapiro

עת ספוד ועת רקוד —A time to mourn and a time to dance.... (Kohelet 3:4)

Today is a celebration, a time to dance. Though many of our dreams have been trampled on and some have been deferred, many have also been realized. Seneca, a Roman philosopher, once said: It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare; it is because we do not dare that things are difficult.

I hope that we at JOFA will continue to dare—and to dream.