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Putting Women Back in the Picture: A Celebration

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Scroll of Honor Essay by Zelda R. Stern

A JOFA JOURNEY

Along with my five siblings I grew up in a Conservative Jewish home but found myself increasingly drawn to Orthodoxy and in my late 20s finally declared myself Orthodox.

I was happy with my newfound Orthodoxy. Happy, that is, until some years later when I felt stirrings of discontent which grew louder and which I was increasingly unable to quiet.

Along this journey I studied texts on my own, attended many classes and went to shul regularly. And I loved all these opportunities to learn and to pray.

However, in my late 40s I began feeling very uncomfortable as I wondered, for example, why one of the daily prayers men recite thanks G-d for not making them a woman.

When the Sefer Torah was held aloft, and we say the words, "This is the Torah which Moses placed before the children of Israel," I became distressed that, in some shuls, I could not see the Torah because the women's section was too far back, or the balcony was too high up, or the mechitzah too opaque and tall.

I didn't understand why scholars-in-residence were always men.

On tombstones, why was the name of the mother of the deceased not included? Why were the names of the mothers of the bride and groom not written in the ketubah?

I even began to wonder why bentschers included images only of men, except for a few which had images of women lighting candles.

But most painful of all was my growing awareness of the terrible plight of agunot.

I began questioning so much of what I had believed in for 20 years. But I still loved Orthodoxy with all its richness and depth of observance.

To whom could I turn for answers? Was it possible for things to be different? And if so, how?

And I felt lonely, for who else could possibly have these same questions and yearnings.

In February of 1997 I attended the First Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy, a two day event that changed my life forever.

My confusion, searching and questions were addressed in the numerous seminars and workshops and in the conversations so many of us had throughout the two days.

Still ringing in my ears are the words of the closing plenary's speaker, "Tear down those balconies! Judaism is not a spectator sport."

Here I was among a like-minded group of women and men who believed halacha allowed for women to participate more fully in all spheres of religious life.

JOFA was created from this conference in 1997, and I had the great fortune and joy to be asked to join the founding board.

My yearning to empower Orthodox Jewish women grew and became an integral part of my life. I came to believe in maximizing the potential of Orthodox women in all areas of life – in their families, shuls, schools, and in Jewish communal organizations—to the full extent possible within halacha. And I believed that through this meaningful participation in Jewish life, the whole of the Jewish world would be enriched and elevated.

It was JOFA that shaped my formerly inchoate ideas and dreams into clear goals.

And then my funding began to flow from these values and this passion and this commitment to JOFA's ideals.

At the same time JOFA was taking shape, my siblings and I were assuming a greater role in the stewardship of our family foundation. And as I took courses in grantmaking and met with my mentor, Barbara Dobkin, and with others so important to the development of my thinking, I began to look closely at the way I did my funding.

I began formulating a tzedaka plan aligned with my values and passions.

When I was asked to donate \$18 per letter for a new Sefer Torah, I asked the solicitor if women and girls were going to be allowed to read from this Torah. When the answer was no, I responded that I could not give any money to this project, but that I would be happy to consider future donations for a Torah that would be read by women and girls.

When solicited by organizations that did not allow women officers, I responded that since I believed women should be allowed to serve in leadership positions I could not support their organizations.

I could not give to a girls' Yeshiva which did not have the study of Talmud included in its curriculum.

And I came to love JOFA more and more, and fund it more and more. It became the primary recipient of my tzedaka.

For JOFA embodied all that I believed in.

JOFA promotes women's leadership, works to influence schools to be more gender sensitive with its personnel and its programming, teaches how to celebrate life cycle events in a more inclusive way, educates us in how to increase women's participation in synagogue life, struggles to ameliorate the problem of agunot, shows us how to enrich our spiritual lives. And it urges us to give tzedaka in a thoughtful way—a way that expresses clearly our most deeply held values and beliefs.

Change cannot happen by itself. It requires our ideas, our voices, and our money.

JOFA **imagines** a different future, a changed future, one with limitless possibilities. JOFA **educates** people as to what this future looks like, **inspires** us to believe in this different future and **advocates** for this future. JOFA imagines, inspires, educates and advocates.

We all have the power to enrich, elevate, empower and actualize the potential of Jewish women. By so doing we create a just, fair and compassionate world.