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Contact: Jewish Women Watching

www.jewishwomenwatching.com

Jewish Community Studies the Sexism that Punishes an Eshet Chayil. - Jewish Women Watching Demands that Valorous Women Receive Respect from Their Religious Communities -

Religious Jewish women devoted to Torah, worship, and communal leadership are victims to constant sexist backlash. In recent weeks the Rabbinical Council of America rejected women's ordination as rabbis; a few years ago, the National Council of Young Israel ruled that women and converts are not permitted to be synagogue presidents in their communities; Women of the Wall routinely face violence from police and religious bystanders for their organized worship at the Western Wall. In response, Jewish Women Watching (JWW), the anonymous, rabble-rousing feminist collective, revealed its latest project that shames the groups responsible for these events and calls on the Jewish community to support women in leadership roles.

The first audiences for this project were New York Jews gathered for Shavuot, a holiday which traditionally entails Torah study. This was a perfect fit, as the new JWW project is centered on a biting text study of the Shabbat evening song, Eshet Chayil. Dressed as owls, they descended on late-night study sessions across Manhattan to distribute their work. The ultimate purpose of the text study was to reveal the hypocrisy behind the rhetoric of the well-loved song. Families sing about an admirable eshet chayil, woman of valor, but are stumped when answering the key question, "A woman of valor, who can find her?" JWW explains that today's eshet chayil is "locked out of the rabbinate, barred from synagogue leadership, and in handcuffs." The image of the valorous women must stay in the words of the song - the Orthodox community will not allow her to live in the real world.

Three sexist events are highlighted in the text. The first is the widely publicized Modern Orthodox rabbinical ordination of Sara Hurwitz. It seemed only moments had passed since she completed her lifetime of studies and assumed the role of communal leader with the title of "Rabba" that Agudath Israel pressured community members to strip her of the designation. The Rabbinical Council of America followed with an official statement rejecting women's ordination. "Ordination? More like subordination," exclaimed Emma Goldman. "Sara Hurwitz's community and teacher supported her while Orthodox gate-keepers refused to give her the acclaim she deserves."

Modern Orthodox women are barred from the rabbinate, but can they be lay leaders, moving beyond the role of sisterhood president to effect real change? In 1997, decades after the women's movement, Gail Billig became the first female president of an Orthodox synagogue. Ten years later, the National Council of Young Israel ensured that this would not happen in their communities and declared that women and converts are not permitted to be presidents of synagogues. "What are the men so afraid of?" asked Clara Lemlich.

Women in Israel who express their religious devotion are even met with physical threats. On January 5, 2010, the police fingerprinted Anat Hoffman, a leader of the group Women of the Wall, and threatened her with a felony charge for leading her monthly prayer group at the Western Wall. WoW has assembled for over twenty years at the Western Wall to read Torah, sing, and pray. The women who gather are harassed, arrested, and assaulted. Miriam the Prophet explained, "Violence towards women who identify as religious is a challenge to all who want to embrace Jewish rituals publicly." She cited

an additional incident - On May 11th, Noa Raz, another member of WoW, was physically attacked in Beersheva because her arms bore the marks from her tefillin.

As JWW member Rosalia Luxemburg commented, “The beautiful words of Eshet Chayil have inspired Jewish women to leadership throughout the centuries, but the Orthodox establishment is demonstrating that those are only empty words. We need to reward our valorous women, not punish them.” As it says in the song itself, “Give her credit for the fruit of her labors.”

JWW’s text study can be found on www.jewishwomenwatching.org. It is time for Jews to follow the instructions of tradition.