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## The Rhetoric of Heteroglossia of Jewish Feminism: A Paradox Confronted

Kevin T. Jones and Rebecca Mills

**Abstract:** *Judaism has been unprecedented in its efforts to include women in a traditionally patriarchal religion. Over the past thirty years, the language of ancient rituals and ceremonies, sacred to the faith, have been altered and re-written to include women by uniting the forces which hold it together with the forces which were pulling it apart. This essay examines how Judaism has confronted this paradox by using Bakhtin's notion of Heteroglossia, or co-existing dialects, as the vehicle that makes this union possible.*

Baum (1998) notes that in the winter of 1972, ten well-educated young women from Manhattan, caught up in the enthusiasm of the 1960's and the writing of a relatively unknown Jewish woman named Betty Friedan, braved the snowy roads of the Catskill Mountains to confront an assemblage of Conservative rabbis at the famous Concord Hotel. The young women wanted the Conservative movement to consider ordaining female rabbis and investing female cantors. These issues were controversial within the Jewish community, of great significance to these women and the others they represented, and would have drastic consequences for years to come. Not only was specific change sought, but the most emotionally charged issue became the question of literally, "who counts?" Traditionally, Judaism requires a quorum of ten people, a minyan, for public prayers to be said. Traditionally, Judaism counts only men. For these first women who sought change, the so-called mothers of Jewish feminism, their dream was to reform and reconstruct Judaism while not abandoning tradition. Their effort culminated one year later when the Rabbis ordained the first woman. These women embarked on a delicate journey that would attempt to both create change and maintain consistency.

This perceived struggle between language and faith is a paradox for Jewish women as it confronts them with inherent contradictions. Jewish feminists have sought to develop a language which includes their much ignored voice, while at the same time maintaining a belief system based upon ancient premises designed to ignore that voice. The paradox has been successfully confronted as Judaism has embraced feminism. Accomplishing this goal was no simple undertaking by any means. Adler (1998) in her book *Engendering Judaism*, explains the hurdles Jewish feminists have had to overcome: "Jewish law needed to be reconstructed to eliminate the ancient premise that women are subordinate to men, yet at the same time maintain the law. For without law there is no means to translate the stories and values of Judaism into action" (A14).

Jewish feminists maintain a role of general significance throughout most of Judaism. While still not recognized by the Orthodox, today women routinely become rabbis and are counted in minyans of Reform and most Conservative synagogues (Zaidman 50). Their influence is profound and powerful. American women have transformed their status in Judaism, creating one of the most dramatic cultural shifts in centuries of Jewish history. This cultural shift in the United States has had a profound influence on the movement of Jewish feminism in Israel (Ben-David B3). Heschel, a scholar and author of one of the first books on Jewish feminism notes, "The newfound power of women is the greatest change in Jewish life since the destruction of the Temple in the first century" (Baum 1998, A1).

This position of power has been accomplished through the altering of Jewish rites, rituals, and celebrations. The language of the law has been changed in order to create change while maintaining consistency. Jewish ceremonies such as the Passover Seder have been rewritten to include the plight of women. Exclusive Feminist Seders, held for women only, are celebrated every year around the country. Women argue that their faith is strengthened and they are allowed to focus more on what it means to be Jewish through the inclusion of women in traditional services (Zavoral 2000, 7B). Anchored in tradition and ritual, the modification of these celebrations is not new to Judaism. Peterson (1996) notes, "Judaism in fact has [always] evolved, and Jews have always created new rituals" (150). But the new rituals must be created through the inclusion of the old tradition. Those forces that hold Judaism together must find a way to co-exist with those forces that are bent on pulling it apart.

The seemingly contradictory desire to maintain a female voice in a postmodern society while simultaneously maintaining their Jewish birthright created a dissonance that many Jewish women could not ignore. They confronted and resolved the paradox through reconstruction of the language of rituals, ceremonies, and rites. The reconstruction of the language to simultaneously accommodate opposing forces attracts our attention in this study. Our goal is to examine how the contradictory aspects of paradoxes can simultaneously be adhered to and transcended. We examine how Jewish law has been rhetorically reconstructed to include women while maintaining the traditions and values of Orthodox Judaism.

To understand how Jewish Feminists have accomplished this task, we used the dialogic tools of Mikhail Bakhtin. His concept of heteroglossia, meaning roughly the dialectic voices present in language, serves as an excellent methodology for examining the rhetoric of



Jewish feminism. This essay will first identify the components of Jewish feminism, second, outline Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia, and finally identify how Jewish feminists have engaged in heteroglossia in various traditional ceremonies and rites to achieve a voice in Judaism.

### Jewish Feminism

The quest for a voice in Judaism has not been easy for women. In Israel, the mere presence of women praying with men near the Western Wall provoked violent protests by Orthodox men. In America, wrangling over the role of women split some Jewish communities even as it spurred the growth of others. Jewish women had to wrestle with Old Testament scripture, or more importantly, Jewish law. While the inclusion of women as rabbis and in minyans has become routine in Reform and most Conservative synagogues, resistance is still strong among the Orthodox.

In 1948 Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist movement within Judaism in America,<sup>1</sup> observed, "Many talented Jewish women not only began to lose interest in Jewish life, but actually turned against it . . . If we do not want our talented women to follow their example, we must find a place in Judaism for their powers" (405). This advice went unheeded for several decades until Jewish women themselves began to demand changes.

Prior to the 1972 meeting at the Concord Hotel, Lacks (1980) notes that in September of 1971, a group of thirteen young women from Conservative and Orthodox backgrounds who had met in consciousness-raising groups, had formed a study group called *Ezrat Nashim*, the Hebrew name for the women's court in the ancient temple (170). *Ezrat Nashim* was determined to press for change within the traditional framework of religious practice. In March of 1972, the women presented their manifesto to the Rabbinical Assembly, calling for an end to the second-class status of women in Jewish life. In the following years, several Jewish feminist organizations began to emerge around the country and Judaism could no longer ignore women.

In the mid-1980's, Laura Geller, then a young rabbi, organized a conference at the University of California, Los Angeles on women's spirituality and the Jewish tradition. Geller, ordained in 1976 as the third woman rabbi in the Reform movement, argues that this conference began a shift among feminists from a singular focus on equality to a focus on spirituality (Baum 1998, A14). Ancient traditions were challenged by scholars and activists such as Rita Gross, a prominent Jewish Feminist, who argues for "creating an environment that furthers the religious expression of all Jews, both male and female" (Oppenheim 154). Rachel Adler, professor at the University of Southern California and Hebrew Union College, echoes Gross's concern when she states, "I don't believe categories or rubrics of Jewish law are immutable.

I believe that God wants there to be justice" (Baum 1998, A14).<sup>2</sup> The quest for justice sought to refocus the debate from feminist platform to a spiritual platform. Women argue that through their inclusion in traditional services, their faith is strengthened and they are allowed to focus on what it means to be Jewish. Professor Tova Cohen, director of the Ganya Gottesfeld Heller Center for the Study of Women in Judaism, explains that "reinterpreting Jewish ritual from a feminist perspective . . . open[s] up Jewish learning, on various levels, to a wide number of women" (Ben-David B3). Ellen Blum can attest to this fact. After attending a Feminist Seder, she stated, "This one act of communion with other Jewish women changes my life for awhile and propels me to do new things" (Baum 1998 A15).

Jewish ceremonies and rituals have been modified across the United States not to separate women, but with the intention of exploring ways of nurturing and fostering their spiritual growth. Anne Bayme explains that her spiritual transformation began with an all-women's Seder that she organized in her hometown of Macon, Georgia. It followed the order of a traditional Seder, but was edited to include a female perspective. Bayme also collected Jewish books, looking for women's stories and ways to add female symbolism to holidays. A few years ago, she and other women in Macon began marking Rosh Chodesh, an ancient holiday that celebrates the new moon each month with singing, dancing, and discussion groups. Jewish women across the country have reclaimed the celebration, which traditionally was an occasion on which women had a respite from household work. In Bayme's synagogue, the congregation began using egalitarian language, not referring to or addressing God as "He" in English. Bayme states, "We're trying to get at the core of the liturgy and flesh it out with new rituals, to fill a spiritual void" (Baum 1998 A15). In time, the synagogue also elected its first female president and dissolved its "Sisterhood," traditionally the place where Jewish women exerted power. Instead, women joined the board of directors along with men, thus eliminating the existing power imbalance.

### Heteroglossia

In his collection of essays *The Dialogic Imagination*, Mikhail Bakhtin describes the unique rhetorical effects of language through the development of the concept of heteroglossia (meaning roughly the dialectical voices present in language), and the study of heteroglossia's effect on dialogism. Bakhtin sees all of language as existing in the presence of two opposing forces, one that is centrifugal and forces change, and another that is centripetal and forces consistency. Holquist (1981) notes

The two contending tendencies are not of equal force, and each has a different kind of reality attaching to it: centrifugal forces are clearly more powerful and ubiquitous – theirs is the reality of



actual articulation. They determine the way we actually experience language as we use it – and are used by it. Unifying centripetal forces are less powerful and have a complex ontological status.  
xix

Languages of religion and the law, for instance, represent centripetal force, resistant to change, and not subject to the testing and amending of meanings. Most human discourse, however, is subject to the centrifugal force of change. Words change with every speaker, with every context, with every utterance of them. This disintegrating force opposes the stability of fixed meanings, causing an ever-growing richness of language.

Within the context of these two forces, Bakhtin discusses one of his key terms, heteroglossia, which can be defined simply as the dialects that co-exist in language<sup>3</sup> (xix). These co-existing dialects should not be confused with co-existing languages, or foreign languages, which are called polyglossia. Foreign words and phrases are *signs of polyglossia*. In large centers of culture and trade the effect of competing languages is most obvious, but speakers everywhere are polyglot at least to an extent because other languages have influenced the language available to them. The concept of a “pure” language is a delusion.

Heteroglossia refers to the condition not of co-existing languages but co-existing dialects. At first glance this observation appears both obvious and traditional to scholars in speech communication, who, after all, described geographical and cultural dialects decades ago.<sup>4</sup> But earlier dialecticians did not take as their field the wide range of stylistic utterances that Bakhtin includes under heteroglossia, and their aim was primarily to describe and to classify, not to explain the effects of dialects on the meanings available in the language as a whole. For Bakhtin the notion of heteroglossia is central to understanding how any utterance can and must communicate meaning and values.

Bakhtin argues that language, when used in a vehicle such as the novel, can be defined as a diversity of social speech types and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized. Bakhtin’s catalog of heteroglossia includes

Social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, languages of authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even the hour (each day has its own slogan, its own vocabulary, its own emphases). (263)

Any style marked enough to signal its presence contributes to heteroglossia. For Bakhtin, this heteroglossia, an ever-present mixture of constantly evolving strata of language, is the condition from which meaning derives; it enables meaning. Every utterance, indeed every word, affects and is affected by all the  
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language strata against which it is always juxtaposed, with which it is always in dialogue. For Bakhtin this juxtaposition, the interaction of strata in dialogue with one another, not any single utterance, is the source of meaning.

We have found limited applications of heteroglossia. For Bakhtin, heteroglossia is what makes novels possible. HopKins (1989) engaged in an effective analysis of heteroglossia in Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*. Jones (1993) expanded the application of heteroglossia beyond the novel to the text of presidential discourse. We intend this essay to further expand the application of heteroglossia by identifying the presence of centrifugal and centripetal language forces in religious ceremonies.

### Heteroglossia and Jewish Feminism

Judaism is rooted in ancient rituals and traditions, traditions that have become the centripetal force holding the identity and culture of Judaism together. Petsonk (1996) notes:

A ritual is a spiritual ballet. It captures in symbols the emotions that go with an important life transition. Think of the cheer that goes up when the glass is broken at the wedding, or the moment of finality when the mourner shovels dirt onto the coffin at a funeral. Passing from one stage of life to another can be frightening; rituals ease the transition by affirming the sacredness of the moment and helping people feel a connection to their community and heritage (142).

However, while the centripetal force of tradition remains, in the past three decades modern Jewish feminism has created a centrifugal force that has challenged century-old traditions. For women, self-discovery has included the development of their spirituality. For a Jewish woman, this means exploring a faith that excludes her. Petsonk states, “In facing some of the new crises of modern life, ‘women are cut adrift’ at the moment when they most need the solace and anchor of tradition” (148). This crisis has led to the emergence of the heteroglottal language of Jewish feminism. Women must create a voice for themselves in the midst of a tradition that has excluded them. Petsonk describes this challenge when she notes, “Our task is to take the wisdom of Judaism and apply it to our lives” (148). We here examine some of the key redefined rituals: the Seder; prayer; and Kaddish.

### Feminist Seder

Passover is the most ancient of all Jewish festivals. Celebrated for seven days on the anniversary of the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt over 3,000 years ago, Passover is inherently a rhetorical event. Its central activity is transmission of the story of the Exodus to future



generations. The ritual supper on the first night of Passover is called the Seder. Families gather around a festive table and the story of the beginnings of the Jewish nation are told. Included in this story is the recitation of the ten plagues that were visited on Egypt prior to the Exodus of the Jews. Together, the compilations of prose which function as a guide for the ritual is called the Haggadah. Another important facet of the observance of the Seder is the Seder plate that contains six dishes representing the six symbols of the Passover Seder.

The rewritten Passover Seder includes the plight of women. In 1998, 500 women attended a Feminist Seder in a Brooklyn, New York dining hall overlooking the Brooklyn Bridge. On each Seder plate, along with the traditional symbols of the Exodus from Egypt was an orange. This orange brought new symbolism to the ceremony as a reminder of the time an elderly man lectured a Jewish Feminist group at a forum in Florida saying that, "a woman belongs on the bime (pulpit) the way an orange belongs on a Seder plate" (Zavoral 7B). Another element present on traditional Seder plates is bitter herbs. In the Feminist Seder attended by Shalit, the participants chorused, "At all other seders we eat bitter herbs to recall the suffering of the slaves in Egypt, but at this Seder we eat bitter herbs to taste the bitterness and frustration we feel at our exclusion from history" (73).

Shalit noted from her personal experience, "when it came time to light the candles to mark the onset of the Passover festival, reading from their rewritten Haggadah women announced: 'Lighting the candles is traditionally a woman's duty in Judaism. Tonight we light these festival candles not because we must by Jewish law, but in order to shed light on this seder table'" (73). In this Seder, the recitation of the ten plagues becomes "The Ten Plagues that [Men] Have Brought Against Women." These included: "The Lack of Acceptance of Lesbianism"; "Gender wage Gaps and the Feminization of Poverty"; "The Media Image of Women"; "The Lack of Research Attention to Women's Medical Needs"; "Lack of Female Role Models"; and "Our Exclusion From History."

The centripetal forces of the Feminist Seder include the recitation of the Exodus story, the presence of the Seder plate, the gathering of the Jewish community on the first evening of Passover, and the recognition of the anniversary of an important historical event. Whereas the centripetal forces maintain the tradition and values of the ancient rituals of Judaism, the inclusion of feminist rhetoric addresses the centrifugal forces that challenge Judaism. Both ancient rituals and modern values demand certain words, languages, and speech.

In the symbolic lighting of the candles, the women still lit candles in the traditional format, but new meaning was assigned to the event when the seder participants declared that the candles "shed light" on the oppression of women. From the interaction of the different dialects, meaning emerges. By reclaiming the obligatory task of lighting candles for the education of woman about their

past oppression, new meaning is created within a familiar context.

Additional heteroglottal acts can be identified in the changing of the Haggadah, which includes the ten plagues. The oral recitation and inclusion of the speech in the Seder is demanded by tradition. However, the semantic alteration pacifies the centrifugal forces, threatening the inclusion of women in Judaism. Time and space issues are merged, the centripetal and centrifugal forces are united, and the Feminist Seder becomes the heteroglottal vehicle through which women can explore, create, and identify their spiritual nature. Rabbi Marcia Zimmerman of Temple Israel argues that rewriting the Haggadah is not only significant but also necessary since it "brings out the woman's voice that is not listened to" (Zavoral 7B). Being Jewish and being female no longer means non-participation and isolation. As the language demanded by the centrifugal and centripetal forces are stratified and united, the Feminist Seder creates new meaning for women in Judaism.

Recently Chaim Goldberger, an Orthodox Rabbi, was asked if he supported Feminist Seders. He replied, "I support any sincere religious endeavour. Women all over, in every community, are moving toward more women's education . . . and more spiritual development. And that's a positive thing" (Zavoral 7B). By allowing women to express themselves and their spirituality in a more personal way, the Feminist Seder has become part of the vehicle that provided change for the whole of Judaism in accepting women as worthy of positions of authority and equality. The paradox is confronted and addressed.

### Prayer

The rituals of prayer are integral facets of Judaism. Conducted mostly in the first person plural, prayer is largely communal in nature for the Jewish community. As women began to take a more prominent role in Jewish life and participation in the synagogue, it became evident that the ritual of prayer would have to change. Two areas required change to include women: the language used and the way prayer was conducted. Grossman (1992) notes, "Until now, the prayer book has expressed the spiritual yearnings of half the Jewish people, the men who were writers, editors, and translators of a liturgy that was designed for use by men" (187). No matter how sensitive these prayers might have been, they were written from a male perspective with male participation in mind. Because of this exclusion of women, worship services resembled "men's clubs" and the traditional prayer still recited every morning by Orthodox males is, "Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has not made me a woman" (Grossman 191).

In 1972, a task force was established with the elimination of sexist language in liturgy as a high priority. The task force developed a glossary of substitute terminology. This glossary "requires a re-orientation away



from a male-dominated tradition, a change in men's attitudes towards women, and of greater importance, a change in women's attitudes towards themselves" (Grossman 189). Not only was sexist language eradicated, the feminine form in the Hebrew prayers was added to the liturgy. This was a clear indication, even to Conservative synagogues, that women may engage freely in the ritual practice of prayer that was traditionally reserved for men. Grossman believes that the introduction and use of female pronouns has not only increased women's participation but also overturned "stereotypes of women's weakness" (Oppenheim 153). What the feminist movement accomplished in this area was sensitizing the community to the way language is used to perpetuate and foster prejudice, and included women in the development of prayer (Ben-David 3B).

In addition to changing the language used, women had to be included in the way prayer was conducted. Traditionally, women were only allowed in certain areas of the synagogue and were not counted in the minyan, or quorum, of the ten men necessary for prayer. Adler (1998) comments, "It is not only in the women's gallery, then, that women are still invisible. And it is not only at the Western Wall that, after six years of court battles, women must still pray in silence. Including women in prayer requires including not only their bodies, but their prayers."

Co-existing dialects that make up heteroglossia can be seen through the changes that were made to prayer. Judaism has specific types of prayers and times set aside for prayer as part of its religious observance and this centripetal force was maintained. As the feminist movement developed more inclusive language within Jewish liturgy, the language became a centrifugal force being adjusted to change attitudes toward women. Grossman notes that the task force was not trying to develop a "Feminist Theology," only include women within the existing framework, or centripetal forces, of Judaism (193).

Previously the language of prayer embodied a value system that created a hierarchy placing men above women. The language of the men who had written the liturgy was expressed as the right words to communicate with God. When the rewritten language eliminated sexist terms that referred to humanity or God as "he," a different value system became evident. Not only are the specific words different, the underlying values of a religious community can now be seen as recognizing the worth and equality of women. In this case, the contradiction of a religion that is for both men and women but linguistically favors men is eliminated.

### Kaddish

"Saying Kaddish" is the tradition of reciting the mourner's prayer in a minyan each day for the first year after a family member dies. In the past, some women

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found that when they lost a parent and wanted to say Kaddish, they were excluded in the synagogue. Grossman (1992) explains, "If a woman was the tenth person in the room, she might hear comments such as, 'There aren't enough people here for us to say Kaddish'" (230). This implied that women could grieve over the loss of a loved one, but only men could pray. Adler had the experience of wanting to recite Kaddish for her grandmother, but was told by the rabbi that she had to pay \$350 and hire a man to pray for her (147). The experience of being told that they could not participate in a ritual observance of mourning in the synagogue awakened many women to their exclusion in Judaism and caused them to demand that women be equal to men in all aspects of congregational life.

The recitation of Kaddish by women has engendered much controversy but progress has been made. Grossman notes

[Although women's] individual actions do not change the structure of the synagogue or its service, they do, by their public nature, have an effect on the consciousness of all the men and women who are present. A similar function was performed earlier by those women within Orthodox synagogues who stood and said the Kaddish prayer aloud when they were in mourning, even though they were not required to do so. Today, a woman saying Kaddish is no longer an aberration that is met with resistance—both a verbal and physical symbol (233).

The verbal symbol Grossman refers to is the prayer being recited and the physical symbol is the mourners (including women) standing in the synagogue.

When Kaddish is recited and women are included, several categories exist. The religious and historical dialects are present in the wording of the Kaddish that has been said for centuries. This is juxtaposed with the individual dialects of the people who have lost family members expressing their grief, and the sociopolitical dialect of the feminists now claiming their right to recite Kaddish. With these dialects intersecting at the time Kaddish is recited, the new meaning brought forth is that women can now take an active role and pray as well as grieve over a loss. Zaidman argues "by performing the ritual in public, the women made the message more powerful, but the message was also an essential part of the structure and the content of the ritual itself" (52). This delicate balance of keeping the essential parts of a ritual while changing it to include women has been accomplished in the observance of Kaddish. In the past, women were not denied the right to mourn and grieve as long as it was done in silence. Now, the public nature of this ritual allows women to bring their expression of grief into the open thus symbolizing the value, presence, and



participation of women in the daily workings of a Jewish congregation.

## Discussion

Examining Jewish feminism through the lens of heteroglossia allows us to see how the rhetoric of Jewish women reconciled a seemingly impossible and contradictory situation. As women reclaimed the rituals of Seder, prayer, and saying Kaddish through changing the language and form of the ceremonies, they created a voice that expressed their spirituality and let them feel part of a religion that had previously excluded them. By successfully engaging in heteroglossia and accommodating the centripetal and centrifugal forces Jewish feminists brought about long term, meaningful change.

Lin (1999) articulates Heschel's opinion that other groups within Judaism have not always been as successful because of their failure to maintain consistency, or the centripetal force (A8). An example of this is when a group of Jewish lesbians at Oberlin College placed a crust of bread on a Seder plate to protest the ban traditional Judaism has placed on homosexuality. Heschel, who began the tradition of the orange on the Seder plate, remarked, "Once you put a piece of bread on the Seder plate, it's no longer Passover" (Lin A8). This was considered a radical gesture, as all bread products are forbidden during Passover. While oranges are not traditional, Heschel notes that they are "an acceptable food at Passover and can easily be sectioned and shared during the discussion. It's something everyone can participate in" (Lin A8). Heschel and many others can deeply sympathize with lesbians and other disenfranchised members of their society, but can also realize that this particular action was rhetorically less successful than other feminist modifications because it did not accommodate the traditional aspects of the holiday. Since they have successfully increased opportunities for women to participate in the Jewish faith, the Feminist Seder, inclusive prayer, and reworked Kaddish are elements of Judaism that will have lasting effects.

The examination of Jewish feminism provides a real world model for the applicability of Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia. We can identify centrifugal and centripetal forces that have emerged in the language of Jewish feminism. Traditional ceremonies that have undergone linguistic change to become more equitable for women have involved both the maintenance of tradition, and substantial change. These ceremonies went beyond being rhetorically symbolic of the desires of women in Judaism to become powerful mechanisms that have prompted the Jewish community to accept women as worthy of positions of equality and authority. The ability of Judaism to incorporate women into traditional frameworks is understood more clearly through heteroglossia. Bakhtin states that the evolving strata of language enable meaning;

the women described in this study consciously undertook the task of juxtaposing the language of Judaism with the language of women and gender equality. The meanings and values that emerged from the dialogue provided an environment where women were able to publicly participate as members of their community. This not only impacts their personal lives, relationships, and spiritual well being, but also provides an equitable and nurturing environment for future generations.

This study notes only three areas of practice in Judaism. A broader study encompassing the whole of Judaism might identify additional areas where heteroglossia is an active, relevant part of religious ritual. Such future work might explore the struggles of Orthodox Jewish women to strive to find their own voice among a rigid belief system. Additional studies might explore ways in which women in other religious groups or women in groups considered on the fringe have struggled to obtain a voice and achieve inclusion. Identification of failed attempts to join the centrifugal and centripetal forces, such as the attempt from the gay community to gain recognition in the Seder, might prove useful in better understanding the criteria necessary for heteroglottal actions to be successful.

## Conclusion

Religion in America is at a crossroads. Cultural growth and diversity have challenged organized religion and forced many religions to re-evaluate time honored traditions and laws. Many religions have fought this change while others have embraced it. George Barna (1998) notes:

The world around us is changing at an unprecedented pace. What worked ten years ago is already obsolete: cultural analysts estimate that our culture essentially reinvents itself every 3-5 years. In other words, the core attributes of our society—language, customs, dress styles, dominant leisure pursuits, relational emphases, values, and the like—are being substantially reshaped and reconfigured every few years. Most American religions, however, are holding fast to programs and goals established . . . years ago. Many of these religions have mastered the art of denying the cataclysmic cultural changes around them, responding with cosmetic changes that make little difference (2).

Religion's failure to make necessary changes and adjustments to meet individual needs led some people to abandon a faith system altogether and others to make the necessary changes themselves. Many people of faith have begun to mix culture with religion and find a faith that works for them. Rourke (1998) notes that, "with so many new elements influencing the nation's spiritual life, a



growing segment of Americans have started to custom-blend their own faith. Although the numbers remain small, these home-grown innovations are exerting a disproportionate influence on American religion" (A28).

The women of Judaism have spent the past twenty-five years custom blending two elements that make them unique—being a woman, and being Jewish. These two variables often appear to be at odds with each other in Judaism and thus represent a paradox for Jewish women. Through direct confrontation and alteration of the language used in expressing their faith, this paradox has been not only confronted, but also resolved in many ways. These alterations have inspired Jews who had drifted away from their faith. Stammer (1998) notes that, "there are now as many Jews affiliated with synagogues in Los Angeles as there are members of old-line Protestant denominations" (A14).

This growth trend is predicted to not end in Los Angeles. Proponents of Jewish feminism feel they have been victorious in their quest and the largest battles are behind them. Baum (1998) notes that scholars, researchers, and crusaders alike expect continued success in the next several years. Professor Rachel Adler explains, "Jewish women held a status parallel to that of children and slaves. But male children could grow up, and slaves could be freed. Women remained 'the other.'" Now, Adler predicts that in the next twenty years, all branches of Judaism, including the Orthodox, will accept women fully. "These questions of pluralism cannot be evaded much longer" (A14).

## Notes

1. The Reconstructionist movement has been in the forefront of modern reforms in Judaism and has been the most "reflexive of the modernist Jewish movements in respect to women" (Zaidman 50).
2. Adler has been a strong champion of the cause for Jewish Feminism since writing a groundbreaking article in 1971 entitled, "The Jew Who Wasn't There."
3. All references are from his collection of essays *The Dialogic Imagination*, translated by Carl Emerson and Michael Holquist and

edited by Michael Holquist. All references to Bakhtin from here on will be noted by only the page number from *D.I.*

4. Studies in dialect geography continue to be respectable. Note Cleanth Brooks, *The Language of the American South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985).

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