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Resisting the Tradition of Sexism

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Resisting the Tradition of Sexism

Abstract

I stood there, or rather wobbled, standing on a plastic chair, peering over the division of a wall. Three feet away, I saw a boy reading from the Torah. There were men embracing, women cheering from across the wall, and rounds of applause on both sides. I stepped down from the chair and glanced at the sky. In my view, a large barrier towered over me, piercing the blue-- the Western Wall. My haze was then suddenly interrupted by a woman frantically mounting the chair I had previously been standing on. She was desperate to get a view of the boy on his Bar Mitzvah day. Frazzled, I redirected my focus to a new woman with dark hair. She looked as if she was trying to jump across the barrier that separated the men from the women. It was her son's Bar Mitzvah day, and all she could do was watch from afar. All I could do was watch from afar because I am a woman.

Keywords

Sexism, Orthodox Judaism, Resistance, Western Wall, Religion, Georges Lieber

Disciplines

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Comments

First place winner of the 2020 Georges Lieber Essay Content on Resistance.

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Resisting the Tradition of Sexism

I stood there, or rather wobbled, standing on a plastic chair, peering over the division of a wall. Three feet away, I saw a boy reading from the Torah. There were men embracing, women cheering from across the wall, and rounds of applause on both sides. I stepped down from the chair and glanced at the sky. In my view, a large barrier towered over me, piercing the blue-- the Western Wall. My haze was then suddenly interrupted by a woman frantically mounting the chair I had previously been standing on. She was desperate to get a view of the boy on his Bar Mitzvah day. Frazzled, I redirected my focus to a new woman with dark hair. She looked as if she was trying to jump across the barrier that separated the men from the women. It was her son's Bar Mitzvah day, and all she could do was watch from afar. All *I* could do was watch from afar because I am a woman.

At that moment, as a woman at the wall, I craved fairness-- equal divisions, books for women, an indiscriminate dress code, an equal amount of chairs--at least the right to "be Jewish" at the wall-- but those liberties were not granted to me. I became a mere spectator in my own religion. At the wall, rules state that I can not wear tefillin, have a Bat Mitzvah, read from the Torah, or lead prayer. In addition, women are not reserved the same amount of space as men. Of the 60 meters of wall designated for prayer, only one-fifth of that contains the women's quarters,

meaning, the men have about four times more space.¹ Moreover, the women's limited space was so crowded I could not touch it. I couldn't even pray for equality. I like to believe that I am worthy to walk those extra 18 meters that would make the men's and women's sides even, yet the rules do not.

Similar to how I can not freely express my religion at the Wailing Wall, it appears that I can not express myself as a woman either. At the wall, I can not show my shoulders, expose my knees, or dress without the restriction of men's rules.² I am not saying that dressing modestly belittles one's identity as a woman, but why must I be required to cover myself when men are not? Is this truly what God wanted from women at the wall? It is hard to believe that any woman, or feminist, or my God, would consent to these rulings. In Genesis 2, Adam and Eve *both* wandered the earth naked. However, after they ate God's forbidden fruits in Genesis 3, the Bible describes that, "the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew they were naked" (Genesis 3:7). If both Adam and Eve found embarrassment in their nakedness and felt the need to cover themselves, why today is that emphasis pushed on women? Why must I carry the burden of a man's wandering eyes? The answer is: the dress code is not a mandate from God, but from men.

God does not care if you're naked and crying for help, or if you're covered head to toe because we're all God's creations and made in his image. Men at the wall force us to cover ourselves, and separate us into tiny boxes for the fear that our bodies will distract them from prayer. In what world is that valid? This is a man's religion. Yet, I am so much more than the sexism embedded in my religion and daily life. I am more than just a distraction, forced to cover

¹ Avnery, Uri. "Israel, Women, and the Wailing Wall." Progressive.org, May 18, 2013.
<https://progressive.org/dispatches/israel-women-wailing-wall/>.

² Hecht, Albert. "How To Make the Most of Your Day at the Western Wall." Culture Trip. The Culture Trip, March 28, 2019.
<https://theculturetrip.com/middle-east/israel/articles/how-to-make-the-most-of-your-day-at-the-western-wall/>.

myself for a man's benefit. I am so much more than what men, regardless of their religion, made me to be. I am more than a housewife, more than a sexualized entity, and more than a pretty face. But the justification of "tradition" is not enough, because *my* God would not shove me in a corner, at the holiest place in the world, and leave me to drown in a man's world.

However, perhaps there is still a chance that I am being too harsh. I understand that not all men agree or support the sexist directives at the wall, and that not all Orthodox or traditional Jews act on sexist beliefs, but it angers me to see the sexist practices created under the image of our religion. I respect Orthodox views, the interworkings of their families, and Orthodox women's personal decisions on how to go about femininity, religion, and sex; however, the message the wall brings is hurtful. Judaism, or even Orthodox Judaism doesn't need to be this way. I was raised Jewish, learning to read the Torah as men have, sitting next to my father at services, and dressing how I wanted in the presence of the prayers I have sent to God, yet I cannot help but feel defeated.

I understand that the separation of sexes at the wall is a deeply rooted tradition, but why must I be treated worse when separated from the men? And what if I did not identify with either gender? Does the wall symbolize the lack of space for me in this religion? Is there some greater purpose for women in Judaism that I am missing out on? Yes, these rules stem from history, and repetition, but are they still applicable today? Is it still valid today that I still skip college and cook for my husband? Must I be a nurse and not a doctor? A flight attendant and not a pilot? And the biggest question of all: as the world evolves beyond the tradition of sexism in Judaism, can I not be equal? Can I not be a woman and an Orthodox Jew? Or simply an equal visiting one of the holiest places in the world? There must be some grand justification for the oppression that

Orthodox women, and women in general, face. And although I want to say that my anger about sexism in Judaism is what repelled me from the wall, that is untrue. In that moment as I stood peering over a division and up at the wall before me I saw the sexism deeply rooted not only into my religion, but in society. I felt my feet physically carrying me away from the wall and my anger leading me further from my Jewish identity and more towards what I know is true: I am a woman; I am here, and I am equal. It was like my own personal form of resistance.

I was 10 or 11 years old when I asked my father if I could play baseball. Ecstatic, my dad jumped to sign me up for our township's little league. And, for the next couple years, I played for my township's minor *softball* league. I was not allowed to join the baseball team because supposedly baseball was (and apparently still is) "for men". At the time, however, I could not identify the difference between the two. At school I often bragged about my baseball skills until one day I was corrected by a boy in my class. He told me that I did not play baseball, but *softball*, and that *softball* was much easier than baseball. That night when I returned home I asked my father if one day I could play baseball, and he reminded me that boys typically play baseball. I want to make it clear that I do not blame my father for this, because he did not believe the rules, he just acknowledged the normalities in society. He would have cheered me on just as hard if I had been hitting a baseball and not a softball. In that instance I did not resist. I asked myself: so what if I play softball instead of baseball? Is there really *that* much of a difference? But there is a difference. And I may not have recognized it then but I do now.

A brief google search of the origins of softball identified something interesting: in 1887, the game of softball was adapted (from baseball) by a group of men.³ These men made the ball

³ Span, Emma. "Is Softball Sexist?" *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 6 June 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/06/07/opinion/is-softball-sexist.html.

larger and softer, shortened the distances between bases, and made the game “easier and safer”.⁴ With that being the case, I ask myself why is it that men still play baseball, and women play softball? Is it that the “easier” game was designed for women? Or that women were pushed into playing the “easier” game? With either being the case, it is wrong; the division that is prominently outlined in society is aggravating and outright sexist. There are no women in Major League Baseball and there is no Major League for women. And if women get the opportunity to play on a national level, the likelihood that their league receives the same funding, publicity, and popularity is sparse. Why is it that America pays attention to male athletes and their leagues? Is it the leagues themselves or the public focusing their attention to a world of sports that is exclusive to women? But that is not a “baseball/softball” issue, that is a societal issue funded by the hands of sexism. So no wonder I quit. Why would I continue playing a sport that does not welcome me? And perhaps at that point, I did resist. Perhaps I would have liked the sport better if I had been playing baseball.

At least with baseball, or I guess “softball”, I can quit. But there is so much more that I can’t avoid. I can not quit when being a woman becomes dangerous. I can not simply quit when a man whistles, or gropes me. I can not quit being called a “whore” for wearing a skirt that is too short for someone else’s standards. And I certainly can not quit when a man looks at my clothes and tells me that I’m “asking for it” then forces himself on me. How must it feel when my mother forbids me from Ubering home alone because she is scared that a man might take advantage of me? Or when *another* friend comes to me asking what to do because a boy assaulted her?⁵ Unfortunately though, the problem is not unique to women; men are targets of

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ This happened the morning I wrote this section of the essay...

sexual and emotional abuse as well. There will never be a perfect world where rape and predators do not exist for either genders; yet, what does this say about the world if women are the primary victims? I am not disparaging the abuse that men can, and do, face, but I can't ignore the countless news reports and articles about the abuse women face on a daily basis. It is more common than you think, and I refuse to sit and ignore the source of the issue. It is sexism, and it is prominent.

In a study conducted by Pauline B. Bart entitled, "Rape as a Paradigm of Sexism in Society-- Victimization and Discontents", Bart focused on women who were targeted and avoided being raped versus those who became rape victims.⁶ Initially, Bart focused on ways women could avoid rape when targeted; however, her study took a turn when she explored the connection between assault avoidance and female socialization⁷. Bart describes that during her interviews with various victims, questioning them about how they were brought up served as a catalyst into exploring if "being brought up to be a girl and then a lady... sets you up to be a rape victim rather than a woman who avoids rape".⁸ Still, I wish it was that simple. I wish sexism did not exist, and rape would follow as a result. Yet a woman's belief of her own equality is not enough. It would be naive of me to state that it would be a *woman's* upbringing that would cause her assault. Though a woman believing in her femininity could sometimes allow her to fight back with a greater belief in her defense, it is a man's masculinity that ultimately initiates an attack, and if educated and raised correctly, *not* initiate an attack.

⁶ Bart, Pauline B. "Rape as a Paradigm of Sexism in Society-- Victimization and Discontents." *Sciencedirect.com*, www.sciencedirect.com/sdfe/pdf/download/eid/1-s2.0-S0148068579915641/first-page-pdf.

⁷ The way females are raised and taught to think about their own femininity.

⁸ Ibid.

Although a subject as complex and touchy as rape is very much unique to the circumstances, the contradiction between sexism and feminism in sexual assault is astonishing. When a woman is raised in a life that tells her she is small and inferior, she will learn to believe it. When I am told I must play softball instead of baseball, and that I must cover myself, and that I must accept a job for lower pay, or stand at a wall where I am not granted the same space as men, I am taught that I am lesser. And I believe it. So when both society and men tell me in unison to cover up, be quiet, and accept the “tradition” of sexism⁹, and I do not, I believe that the consequences are my fault. I learn to accept the consequences. I tell myself it is normal to be assaulted. It is normal for a religious site to forbid me from expressing my religion, and I accept it. I will no longer accept it, not in my religion, and not in the nature of my attacker.

So at the end of the day, upon further analysis and reflection, it is no surprise that the sexism I experienced at the wall upset me, because it *should* upset me. I ended my visit at the Wailing Wall grinding my teeth and covering my face so that no one could see my tears. Because they were not tears of joy, or of excitement to finally stand at the holy place I grew up learning about, but tears of disappointment. I cried not only for the “easier” sports I have grown accustomed to playing, but for the physical and verbal abuse women face. I cried for the sexualization of women, the unjust dress codes, the misogynists, the lack of female representation, the gender wage gap, and most of all, for the oppression I felt in that moment at the wall. Upon further contemplation I should acknowledge that my rage is not targeted at the Jewish religion in which I have been raised. Before I even stepped foot in kindergarten, I attended a Jewish preschool. I sat with my family through services on high holidays, and even

⁹ In regards to the wall

joined the youth choir at my synagogue. Given my close ties with the Jewish community growing up, I believe my anger is directed more towards sexism as a whole and the fact that it made its way into something so spiritual and sacred as one's faith. But my story does not end there.

A day later after visiting the wall my family returned for Shabbat. Similar to what I had seen the day before, the sides were still uneven and thus unequal. What shocked me most of all however, was the lack of energy from the women's side. What was supposed to be a festive evening felt heavy by women's solemn prayers and sobering silence. On the other side, men cheered rambunctiously without a care in the world; they joined hands and formed a circle jumping around and inside their "man made" enclosure-- they created their own version of a mosh pit. Why weren't the women cheering? Dancing? Or even singing? Isn't that what Shabbat is supposed to be? A celebration? Perhaps there was nothing left to celebrate. Why must I celebrate at a wall that convinces me I am lesser, secondary, and unworthy of the same degree of God's love. I am not lesser; I am not secondary, and I am worthy.

I put my hood on, shifted my glance downwards, and shoved my hands in my pockets. I crept slowly towards the entrance of the men's quarters and shuffled over the line that segregated the general public from the men's section. My father followed and I stood with my back against a stone wall. Three inches away I would have stood obedient. But, at that moment, I stood defiant. Nonetheless, my presence did not matter! Not one head turned from prayer and not one man was distracted. I was solitary in my resistance and therefore no one suspected a thing. In other words, my minor form of resistance did not change a thing. That one small step I took into the men's divide was not one giant leap for womankind. The sides remained divided, and I could

not read the torah, wear what I desired, play baseball, put an end to the oppression of women, and apparently *stop complaining*. This entire essay all I *could* do was explain what I could *not* do. There is not one way I lived resisting the oppression my sex has brought me. At times, you just endure it, survive it, or write about it. Resistance is more complicated than standing alone and masking your identity to “fit into” a position you wanted to be in. I must critique my resistance because I did not want to be a man. I wanted to be treated equal to one. So I resisted the restriction I faced and pretended to be someone I wasn’t in that moment-- someone in a place of gender-based privilege. It might not have been the “correct” thing to do, but for me at that moment, it was.

But even if my presence had altered the rules at the wall, the sexist values embedded in Judaism and in society today would not have come to an end. As women are pushed further and further from the equality they deserve, they are pushed closer and closer towards the ideals of equality. From the women’s suffrage movement, to the ability to go to college, and own property, women have come a long way. But at the end of the day, are those accomplishments really enough to put an end to other forms of resistance? Those are not women’s rights, but human’s rights. I like to believe that each small form of resistance would add to a greater movement because sexism is not extinct! Perhaps one day every woman will be a feminist. And perhaps the divide of the Western Wall will be pushed more towards equality by the words of millions-- we have a long way to go.

I resist not by standing silently disguised as a man at the wall, but by standing strongly as a woman. I resist by writing this essay, studying for my pilot's license¹⁰, using power tools,

¹⁰ Think of the last time you have been on a flight with a female pilot...

attending class, owning *my* surname, having my period without “bitching”, wearing pants, cursing like a (female!!) sailor¹¹, rocking a skirt on a cold day, cheering for JLo at the Super Bowl¹², throwing like a girl, accepting my body type, being smart *and* beautiful, carrying my own bags, walking myself home, flipping off that catcaller, challenging gender discrimination, calling out my religion, and finding my faith in a place within my religion despite my sex. But after all, is there really much I can do about it? Are my forms of resistance “cute”? Am I “just” a sixteen year old girl? A child? The answer lies in the resistance you bring to the world.

Thank you.

¹¹ And although this appears minute, cursing contradicts the stereotypical image of an innocent woman.

¹² Because she composed herself as *she* wanted to without the influence of men.

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