

**Friedan's Freedom/Fifty Shades of Change:  
A Half Century Since the Publication of *The Feminine Mystique*  
*Parashat Tetzaveh/Shabbat Zachor* and WRJ Shabbat  
February 22, 2013**

My friends, this night begins one of the special Shabbatot in Jewish tradition, a Shabbat with a name and special portion attached to it. It is Shabbat Zachor, the Sabbath of Remembrance, the Saturday before – in this case the very day before – Purim. And tomorrow night, of course, we will read *Megilat Esther*, the Scroll of Esther, one of only two books in the entire Bible named after a woman, and featuring one of our traditions best-loved but profoundly problematic heroines. The book raises all kinds of issues, not limited to those of Jewish identity: it tackles gender roles and family life, the fragility of powerlessness and the use and abuse of power in politics and personal life, the objectification of women and the delicate dance between blending in and standing up known so well by any minority. It deals with independence and acquiescence, planning and the unraveling of plans, purpose and absurdity. There are deeper and more profound issues here than in almost any other book – and all this in a work which never once mentions God. Maybe this is why our tradition tells us, on this one night of the year, to drink so much we can't tell the difference between Haman and Mordecai. Maybe it's just too hard... to face this story sober.

An ancient tale, but with echoes in our lives even now. To whom will we bow, and for whom will we rise? And when, in staying seated, do we stand up for a greater good? Sixty some years ago one woman kept her seat on a bus. It

is widely known that nothing was ever the same after that for her race. But in its own way, also, nothing has been the same ever since then, for her gender as well.

Flash forward to a different scene, in a very different city. A crowded celebration in a Buffalo home as a baby girl is welcomed into the world. The Farhi family gathers together, but there is the girl's mother, a physician, Emily Friedan, getting ready for the naming. And off in the corner I shake my head at a scene out of history: our Cantor, Barbara Ostfeld, speaking with Emily's mother, the baby's grandmother. Wow, I say to myself, and I wish I had a camera. There, right there – is the world's first ever female Cantor, a woman who changed the Jewish world...sharing a rugelach or sipping tea or just chatting with a woman who changed the entire world. There is Cantor Ostfeld, speaking with Betty Friedan.

Betty Friedan and Rosa Parks shared a birthday in common, as it happens; both women were born in the beginning of this month, on February 4<sup>th</sup>. More on my mind tonight, however, is the fact that there is a different birthday at play here. Betty Friedan's first book, *The Feminine Mystique*, was published 50-years ago this week. It was, of course, a world-changing work.

A century ago we saw the founding of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, now known as the Women of Reform Judaism, coming in the midst of what is now called the First Wave of Feminism, dealing with suffrage and legal and official barriers to women's participation in public and

professional life. Fifty years ago, with Friedan's book, was the dawn of Second Wave Feminism, focusing on sexuality, family, the workplace, and gender roles in a far deeper and more pervasive way.

In hindsight, of course, there were flaws with this groundbreaking, earth-shaking book. Third-wave critics have pointed out the problems with a kind of revisionist zeal: it was a work that was limited in scope, dealing with the experience of almost exclusively white, middle-class, suburban housewives. It actually contributed to a denigration of traditional women's roles, even as it articulated frustration with those roles. And Freidan did have issues lesbians and homosexuality at first; in her early days she warned against the "lavender menace," – a phrase which was then embraced with pride by a group of activists. It took her awhile to come around on the issues of same-sex marriage and different models of family life. But however fair or unfair the criticism may be now, no one can take away from the fact that this book launched a revolution. And even now, no one should forget... the power of the written word.

It was a simple premise, in some ways, summed up perhaps by a single paragraph: ""The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning [that is, a longing] that women suffered in the middle of the 20th century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As

she made the beds, shopped for groceries ... she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question — 'Is this all?'

The question was not inherently anti-family, or anti-marriage, in and of itself. Yes, it had echoes in the voices of predecessors – M. Carey Thomas, the second president of Bryn Mawr College, was reputed to have said, in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, about the graduates of Bryn Mawr, that “our failures only marry,” a sentiment which was twisted either humorously or maliciously to her having really meant “only our failures marry,” which is, of course, a different message entirely. No, Freidan’s phrase “is this all” is not inherently anti-family, or anti-male. But it moved from an ache to an attitude, from an existential question to a principled position -- against the secondary status of women, the permanent expectation of playing a supporting role to a male lead. And as such, the question cuts into the heart of the Jewish tradition’s legal expectations of women as well.

Why is it – do you know the legal basis in Jewish tradition why women did not serve as rabbis or cantors? It is because women could not “lead” services. Why not? Because women were not required, were not obligated, were not bound by the mitzvah of prayer – they were allowed to pray, but not encouraged to do so, it was secondary. Men were required to prayer, women were grudgingly allowed to – and if you are merely allowed to do something, but others are required to do so, you cannot stand in as a substitute for them, and, in leading a prayer, fulfill their obligation to do so. The men cannot say “amen”

to a woman. That, by the way, is what “amen,” means – it comes from the Hebrew term “emunah”, meaning “faith,” and to say it means that I have faith in what you did, I agree that what you did served as a substitute for my having said something. (That is also why, by the way, it is not necessary – or even a bit gauche – to say “amen” to a prayer which you yourself have recited.)

But what is the basis for women not being required to pray? That is a deeper concept, and that is where the problem lies – the notion that women are exempt from all but two positive, time-bound commandments – that is, women are not obligated by things that must be pro-actively done, and done at a certain time. Why? Because, it was thought, their first duty, their primary responsibility... was to take care of the family...and a crying child or a hungry husband waits on no other duty.

The separation of men and women in traditional Judaism is, then, *at its core*, based on the assumption of women in support of men and children, a dependent role revolving around independent male agents, a secondary status utterly unacceptable in the world we live in today. As women gained the vote in a first wave, and moved on to deeper questions in a second, women watched from behind the balcony and asked the very same question given voice by a suburban housewife: “is that all?”

How far we have come in much of the Jewish world. Glass ceilings are shattered still. In my cohort of colleagues studying together at the Shalom Hartman Institute, sitting as a group of rabbis, there is now one Orthodox

woman, considered for years the “rosh kehillah,” the head of her congregation in Manhattan – but, now, actually independently ordained as a rabbi this past summer, by a prominent Israeli Orthodox rabbinic figure.

How far we have come – so far that some young women, in an act of amnesia, narcissism and ingratitude, even shy away from the label “feminist,” as if a fraction of the paths and choices open to them would be there at all without the stridency and clashes of the past. They are afraid of the word, think it does not apply to them, afraid of being tainted with anger or single-mindedness or a world-view they do not share every part of. Today, they might say, you don’t have to be a feminist to benefit... from the fruits of the feminist tree.

But perhaps a better reason to hold on to the term – even for men who are supportive of women – is the realization, once again, of how far we have yet to go. In Pakistan a young girl named Malala Yousafzai is shot and barely survived simply for wanting to go to school, to learn to read. In India women are raped to death by men who walk away free. Even in Israel female faces disappear from posters lest they offend the ultra-Orthodox with the temptation of their existence, and God-help us the Rosa Parks fight is back, with buses now segregated by gender rather than race appearing on Charedi travel routes even after the Israeli Supreme Court repeatedly rules against them. And last month, once again, women are arrested at the wall for daring to don a tallit. This time the police waited until after the crowds thinned and the cameras

went home, but male domination continues to be expressed with police brutality and state sanction.

And here, in our own backyard, all around us... Last fall revealed that even in this country we are cultures and worlds apart from one another still, with men able to win nominations without even a 5<sup>th</sup>-grade level understanding of biology and physiology, much less issues of basic agency and control over one's own body. And Rush Limbaugh... well, let's not even go there.

Responsibility for freedom continues to depend on the *response* to injustice from each one of us. Two opportunities to share with you in the days to come: shocked and appalled by the story of Malala when she first heard it, a seventh-grade girl in our congregation, Abby Landesman, daughter of John Landesman and Linda Aldoory, as her Bat Mitzvah project, is sponsoring a screening of the new film *GirlRising*, a documentary advocating for the education of girls around the world, especially in developing countries. The screening Abby has arranged for, on Sunday, March 10, at the Majestic Theater in Silver Spring, at 5 pm, is already sold out, I believe – but 18 of those tickets are mine, so please see me if you are interested and able to attend. And the very next day, on Monday, March 11, Rosh Chodesh Nisan – the first day of the Hebrew month of Nisan, corresponding to the monthly gathering of Women of the Wall, there will be a mincha and ma'ariv prayer service outside the Israeli embassy, rain or shine, for women and men of all denominations, in support of Women of the Wall. Two days in the coming month, to ways to take a stand

and make a difference, for women around the world, in the spirit of Sisterhood and support, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Finally came, for feminism, the third wave – a recognition that all of us have multiple aspects of our identity, that there is room for nuance and even difference in the way we tell our stories, and the way we work together. There are women of color, and women of cover, traditional roles elevated in stature and new paths blazed in glory, fifty shades of change not always all on exactly the same page, but all part of the same story.

The special Torah reading for Shabbat Zachor, in traditional congregations where these additional passages are read, the paragraph that gives this Shabbat its name, is from the book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 25. It is the passage that opens “*Zachor et asher asah lecha Amalek*; remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt... how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march... and cut down all the stragglers in the rear...”

Why Amalek, and why now? We read this portion prior to Purim because Haman is, according to tradition, a descendant of Amalek, thus linking one cruel and heartless foe out of history with another associated with this season.

And who are the stragglers, the ones who are behind and struggling to keep up? They are, I think, the voiceless and the weak, the ones who have been shunted aside or kept in their “place,” by others, anyone assigned a

secondary role and not allowed, not encouraged, nor even expected to find their full potential.

Feminism, my friends, is not about women. It is about human beings. Breaking down barriers and opening up doors of potential lists us all.

Afraid, alone, aware of the peril, ultimately one woman takes a risk. “I will go in, I will stand up, I will reveal who I really am, that which has been hester panim, which has been hidden until now. I will go, even though I have not been summoned, even though it was not expected, even though this is not the role someone else wrote for me in the drama of my life. I will go in,” Esther says, “and if I perish, I perish.” And instead... Instead she saved us all.

Shabbat Shalom.