

Barbie lays Tefillin: Discussing women & Jewish ritual

Lesson plan for Adults

This lesson plan is part of a larger Go & Learn lesson entitled “Tefillin Barbie: Considering gender and ritual garb,” which can be found at <http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/jan08/>.

Begin the session by showing the picture of Tefillin Barbie from the above link on the Jewish Women’s Archive website, and follow up with other images of Barbie reading Torah, learning Talmud, and doing *hagbah* (available on Jen Taylor Friedman’s website: <http://www.hasoferet.com/bar/barbie.shtml>).

1. Ask the participants to reflect on what the creator of these pictures was trying to say. (No need to explain anything about the artist, yet.) Do people think that the statement is more about any woman wearing/doing things that are reserved for men? Or, do they think that the choice of Barbie is significant? What does Barbie normally represent? Why might the choice be seen as controversial?
2. Give some background on Jen Taylor Friedman, the creator of Tefillin Barbie and a *soferet* (ritual scribe). See <http://www.hasoferet.com> or http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jen_Taylor_Friedman. Ask participants if having a little more information about the creator of Tefillin Barbie influences the way they perceive it. Does knowing more about Friedman change what message they think Tefillin Barbie conveys?
3. Divide the group into 3-5 smaller groups. Give each one a different blog posting (see appendix; the 3 Jewschool comments can either be given to one group or split up, depending on how many groups you have). Ask each group to discuss the point of view represented by their blogger. Then, bring the groups back together and have each group present its viewpoint as if they are that blogger. Allow some time afterward for open discussion of what they think of some of the issues that were brought up by these postings.

4. At this point, you can choose to focus your program in one of two ways: on body image issues, or on gender and Judaism.

Body image option

To focus your program on some of the body image issues raised by Tefillin Barbie, you can do this next part with adults only, or with adults and their teen daughters.

In 2004, the company that makes Dove products decided to embark on a campaign that showed women with a variety of more realistic body types than one typically finds in advertising or in fashion magazines. Use their short (2 minute) film “Onslaught” (view at www.campaignforrealbeauty.com) as a jumping off point for a conversation about some of the same issues and choices that faced the creators and purveyors of Barbie.

Below are some questions to help guide your discussion of “Onslaught”:

- What is the point of this film? Does the fact that it is put out by a company that makes beauty products change the way you view it?
- Why does the movie begin and end with young girls?
- Why do you think boys/men are left out of this film? Do you think this is fair? If not, what are some of the issues that face young boys who are growing up in today’s society?
- If you were to “talk to your daughter before the beauty industry does,” what would you want to tell her? (Facilitators may choose to make this into an exercise for mothers and daughters to speak to each other on this issue. Allow parents to speak to their teens, but also encourage the teens to give their points of view: How do daughters respond to mothers who may tell them to ignore what it seems like the rest of the world is telling them? Do they believe their mothers are following their own advice?)

Gender and Judaism option

To focus your program on issues of gender and Judaism, use the following text from JWA's online exhibit on anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff (www.jwa.org/exhibits/wov/myerhoff/religion.html). Have participants read through the text (or listen to the longer online audio version) and discuss. Some guiding questions can be found below.

In the following quote from the book *Number Our Days*, Rachel describes “domestic religion” – a concept Myerhoff used to examine the different religious experiences of Jewish men and women:

“Now I did not like to wipe the dishes because the towel was so rough, it didn't feel good, and I did not know how to explain this to Grandmother....So I rebelled against that. The job was not well done. I'll never forget that, how my grandmother, she took me aside one day....She began first all around with praises. “Rucheleh,” she says, “...you know you are carrying a holy name. And according to your name, you have to be perfect.” Well, she gave me all that until when I looked at her, my spirit was rising and rising, higher and faster until I forget all about that sturdy towel and my hatred for it.... after that speech, I was transformed into a different person. The towel became soft as fine linen and I loved to wipe the dishes. And always before me, when I was wiping the dishes was the name of the holy mother Rachel, and I thought, ‘She's right. I am that woman.’ That, that is what I call domestic religion.... “I think the boys didn't have it that way. They knew what the sacred words meant so they could argue and doubt. But with us girls, we couldn't doubt because what we knew came without understanding. These things were injected into you in childhood.... When it goes in this way, I describe, Jewish comes up in you from the roots and it stays with you all your life.”

Guiding questions:

- This text provides some insight into how one woman viewed the roles and differences between men and women in her generation.

- Explain her viewpoint. Do you think she represents the majority of her generation?
- Do you think that her words would speak to this generation? Why/why not? If so, what are the major differences between the genders in this generation in terms of religion or spirituality?
- Should there be any differences in the way that we teach males and females in Jewish tradition?
- How do you think Tefillin Barbie seeks to answer this question?

Additional program suggestions:

- Have participants use this program as a way to encounter new rituals. Check out www.ritualwell.org for background and ideas on creating new, meaningful rituals.
- Use this as a springboard to discuss the roles of men and women in the ritual life of your synagogue. Bring in the Rabbi, Cantor, or ritual committee members to discuss what has changed over time, and what new goals people would like to accomplish in the future.
- Use this as an opportunity to study some of the relevant texts or halakhic responsa on the issue of women's participation in synagogue life – look at the issues of taking an *aliyah* to the Torah, reading Torah, counting in minyan, etc. Enlist area clergy members or teachers to help out.

Appendix: Blog postings on Tefillin Barbie

From Jewschool (3 comments to original October 17, 2006 post “Egal Minyan Ken Sold Separately”)

--rm, October 20, 2006 at 5:15 am

It just doesn't look right. Even with the tallis and the tefillin. As my mother would say: “She's too pretty to be Jewish!” So for a more authentically Jewish appearance, put some braces on her teeth, get her a pair of red Sally Jessy Raphael-type glasses and a 1950's style Hasidic skirt down to her ankles with matching long-sleeved jacket and pillbox hat. Shave off the long, blonde shiksa hair and top it all off with a dark brown sheitel, and voila! You're in business!

--Soferet, October 20, 2006 at 3:43 pm

I'm going to have to agree with Cole, Jabotinsky & RM.

I welcome any opportunity for discussion about women in non-trad roles. Although this took a great deal of time & skill to make, I find it offensive. My concern is Jen's deliberate choice of Barbie iconography, given the associations. Most women of our generation (the over-30s) find Barbie to denote “trivial”. Barbie is a cultural shorthand for plastic, superficial, brainless, and demeaning. It's the ultimate non-feminist icon. This image says to me that basically feminist Jx women are bimbos just “playing” real Jews & that feminist Jx women who CHALLENGE tradition for the love of torah, are really playthings. Either the women or the traditions. So since I'm sure that Jen's intention here was NOT to trivialize feminist women in Judaism, perhaps it could have been better thought out.

--Becca, October 24, 2006 at 2:01 am

This over-30 woman doesn't find Barbie to universally denote “trivial,” and is anything but offended by the playful—even, to me, empowering—image of Davening Barbie (as my husband & I call her: she's got a tallis as well as tefillin, so she's more than just Tefillin Barbie by me! Weekday Shacharit Davening Barbie, in fact, as zt and RM have pointed out...).

Not all feminists are anti-Barbie, nor is Barbie or her history necessarily anti-feminist. Barbie was created by a Jewish businesswoman, Ruth Handler, who named Barbie and Ken after her daughter and son; after undergoing a mastectomy for breast cancer, Handler developed a better type of breast prosthesis (along with post-mastectomy swimwear) as the “Nearly Me” line. (See her [entry](#) on the PBS “They Made America” site, where she’s honored among the Innovators.)

Barbie need not be a bimbo, and the woman who created her certainly wasn’t one. I’d definitely allow (even encourage!) any daughter (or son) of mine to play with Davening Barbie as well as the proposed Egal Minyan Ken.

From Strollerderby: Barbie as Cultural Catalyst (posted March 1, 2007) (<http://www.babble.com/CS/blogs/strollerderby/archive/2007/03/01/barbie-as-cultural-catalyst.aspx>)

Jenna Weissman Joselit's essay at the Jewish Daily Forward about facing off with her niece in the Barbie aisle of the toy store strikes a nerve with me. Barbie is always such a touchy subject for feminists – she has her supporters and detractors, and we are all certain we are correct in our opinions about her.

Something hard to argue about, though, is Barbie's mutability. In the hands of a little girl she is a blank slate, capable of representing nearly any aspect of femininity and yes, of feminism. And in the hands of an adult she can be even more so – witness Joselit's example, Tefillin Barbie – a modified Mattel doll bearing the trappings of a modern Orthodox Jewish woman. This is what has kept Barbie at the top of the toy charts for fifty years: the fact that no matter how much artificial personality her manufacturers and marketing team try to inject her with, she is nothing until she's in the hands of a human being. Once she's out of the box, she is, for better or for worse, whatever you want her to be. There are probably worse symbolic messages to send to little girls than that.

(See Joselit’s article at <http://www.forward.com/articles/between-us-girls/>)

From Hatam Soferet, blog of Jen Taylor Friedman, creator of Tefillin Barbie and a Soferet – ritual scribe.
(<http://hatam-soferet.livejournal.com/271009.html>)

Not in my name

Sometimes people say to Orthodox types, on my behalf:

What do you MEAN a woman can't be a scribe? The Talmud says women, slaves, heretics and so on can't be scribes? How can you say a woman is like a slave or a heretic? That's DISGUSTING!

To which I say:

They're right. My community chooses to say that we should view women as equal to men, and that women should have the same obligations (and hence the same ritual capabilities) as men. Non-egalitarian Orthodoxy does not.

In fact, their choosing to maintain traditional gender roles is probably more in line with existing trends in the secular world – certainly in the USA women's and men's roles are still definitely distinct; look at almost all advertising, as well as expectations re careers, childrearing, care of elderly parents, etc. When a community chooses to maintain gender roles in ritual, it is absolutely reasonable for them to maintain that women do not write sifrei Torah. Challenging this is asking them to alter something pretty fundamental to their culture and way of life – it is asking them to accept an absolutely foreign premise, rather similar to how you would feel if someone insisted you accept Christianity. They are entitled to their view, just as you and I are entitled to ours.

The best thing we can do is build a sustainable, committed Judaism which incorporates egalitarianism into the existing matrix. For that we need mutual respect, self-respect, and self-confidence. We gain authenticity not through others but through ourselves.