REPORT ON NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF JEWISH WOMEN AND MEN  
April 26-28, 1974, McAlpin Hotel

Over the weekend of April 26-28, some 350 women and over 100 men from all over the United States and Canada gathered at the Hotel McAlpin for the National Conference on Jewish Women and Men. The theme of the conference was Changing Sex Roles: Implications for the Future of Jewish Life. The conference attempted to accomplish several things under one roof:

1) To continue the dialogue and planning among Jewish women on the subject of the position of and discrimination against women in the broad Jewish community, both religious and secular.
2) Following through with the major suggestion that resulted from last year's National Women's Conference, to form an interim body to lay the groundwork for a national (United States and Canada) organization of and center for Jewish women.
3) To give Jewish men the opportunity to discuss and evaluate their roles as males, the expectation Judaism has of them, and their reactions to and experiences with those role expectations.
4) To encourage men and women to share their thoughts and feelings in areas of mutual concern to them on the subject of sex roles in Judaism.

From the initial planning stages of the conference, the NETWORK staff realized the difficulty and complexity of the goals it set for itself. Nevertheless, taking off from a resolution mandated by the National NETWORK Convention in December, 1973, to hold a women's conference and men's conference under one roof, the staff worked very hard to compromise with various interest-group factions and to coordinate these goals.

Friday afternoon was spent in small groups. The women chose from workshops including tefillit making, learning haftarah trup, implications of a Jewish Women's Movement, and Feminism and Judaism: Sisters all the way!, an analysis of where general feminism and Jewish feminism diverge in their tenets and programs. Friday afternoon also saw the first planning meeting for the National Jewish Women's Coalition and Center. There were several unscheduled meetings called during the course of the weekend.

The men spent the several hours before Shabbat in workshops dealing with the aims of the men's movement, still a new enough force in American society to warrant an introduction, and in sharing their personal reasons for coming to a Jewish men's conference. At that initial meeting, some of the men already involved in the men's movement for some time felt men came out of a variety of incentives including being "dragged" by wives and curiosity about the Jewish women's movement; there were a number of men, however, who had well-formulated ideas about the necessity of men sharing their reflections and feelings with each other on topics that affect them directly as men. These mixed feelings were to change over the course of the weekend.

There were three Shabbat services held, both on Friday evening and Saturday morning: a mixed traditional service, where men and women participated equally (serving as havdalah or havdilah and, on Shabbat morning, reading from the Torah and having aliyot); a women's traditional service, organized by Arlene Apte of Einat Nashim; and a mixed creative service, run Friday night by Abraham Moshier and Sheila Weissler of the Farbrengen community, and Saturday morning by Robert Mannan. The Friday evening service stressed the theme of the Osar, the season of the first fruits, and culminated with a reading from the Song of Songs and a beautiful service counting the days. At both traditional services, there
were many women wearing talliot and kipot. The feelings generated at these services were quite warm, and it was generally felt that the sense of community generated was strong. Saturday morning, there was also a halakhic men's minyan for those who preferred not to join the egalitarian traditional minyan.

The Friday evening and Saturday afternoon meals were eaten separately by sex. This was done to encourage men and women to interact with members of their own sex and reinforce the aim of having separate men's and women's conferences. The reactions to this set-up were mixed, with a significant group feeling that meals would be ideal times for informal, unpressured dialogue between the sexes. In both the women's and men's dining rooms, there were spontaneous outbursts of song and dancing.

Formally opening the gathering, Leora Fishman, coordinator of the conference, welcomed all the participants at the first plenary session of the conference. After explaining the background of the conference and the reasons for the sometimes separate, sometimes together sessions (all sessions addressed by a speaker or panel were open to men and women; workshops were sometimes mixed, sometimes separated by sex), she introduced Martha Ackelsberg, instructor of Political Science at Smith College and a founding member of Ezrat Nashim, and Rabbi Irving Greenberg, Chairman of the Department of Jewish Studies at CCNY. The two speakers did a marvelous job at engaging in a dialogue on the philosophical and sociological justifications for sex-role differentiation in Judaism. They looked to the creation story in Genesis and Kabbala in pointing to ways of interpreting traditional sex roles as sociological roles, not inherent biological ones; both speakers stressed the importance of looking at the images of God in both sources in trying to reformulate and change the rigidity that has set in halakha regarding male and especially female roles. Both Ackelsberg and Greenberg were scathing in their rebuke of rabbinic considerations but critical of the stagnation of halakha. Greenberg urged that s'micha be granted to women: Ackelsberg raised several eyebrows with her statement that she wasn't sure whether in the interest of human development, any person should be allowed to opt for a lifestyle that involved only house-related chores. The reactions to this session suggested that unlike last year's women's conference where there was a wide diversity among the participants with regard to the degree of involvement in what's being called the Jewish Women's Movement, this year the group was more homogeneous. Coming from secular, religious, straight and gay backgrounds, a very high percentage of both the women and men had been actively involved in a study group, action-oriented group, or consciousness-raising group for at least a year. The consensus of opinion was that less time be spent on theory, more time on the how-to's of effecting change. These feelings to act were vented at small consciousness-raising groups held after the opening session. One of the men's groups was so successful that the members of the group stayed together into the early morning hours.

Saturday morning began with Teffilot which were followed by a panel on Lifestyles and Sex Roles. Speaking on the possible consequences of blurring sex roles, Dr. Sam Altschul, Director of Psychiatric Consultation Services, St. Luke's Hospital in New York, upset many of the participants by his assumption that the conference was dominated by feminists so radical that they had to be addressed like children. Mary and Everett Gendler, long-time activists in the Jewish counter-culture, spoke very positively and convincingly of their experiences in sharing roles in marriage and parenthood. Ros Repolos then spoke on being Jewish and gay; while her comments were well-appreciated, many felt that she did not deal enough with the intersection of these two lifestyles, and how the conflict between them, if there is one, can be resolved. The last scheduled speaker was Diane Schuder, a lawyer and author, who spoke on her experiences as a single Jew; she received tremendous applause when she said that there is more of a movement toward welcoming
single Jews into the community, but the efforts have not gone far enough.

The panel ended with a spontaneous talk by Representative Bella Abzug, who had stopped in to talk with the participants. She spoke about the frustration of being a female leader who has gained authority within American life, but still is not accepted with the Jewish community of the mentioned, as an example, all the Soviet Jewry and Israeli rallies that feature Jewish politicians, but never female Jewish politicians. Her talk was received very enthusiastically and gave a boost to the conference in general.

All Saturday afternoon was spent in workshops held separately by sex. Those for men included: The Jewish American Prince, Living Gay and Jewish, Lome, that is, the legal and halachic disabilities of Jewish male homosexuals, and Family planning and zero population growth. Some of the workshops proved more successful than others; the criterion most often cited by the workshop leaders for the quality of the workshop was the degree of openness and willingness to be intimate rather than intellectual.

The women's workshop topics included Women's sexuality, which drew about 75 women, Raising children, Abortion and zero population growth, Bisexuality, Volunteers vs. (?) professional women, Synagogue ritual and power structure, and Dealing with Halakha and its change.

The first Saturday evening session was on Women in Israel and featured Shulamit Aloni, KCB, as the main speaker. Ms. Aloni spoke about the erosion of the status of women from the days of the yishuv through the present, stressed the legal and halachic disabilities of women and bemoaned the fact that women were not trained or encouraged to take over vital civilian jobs during and after the war. Her sentiments were echoed but also challenged by Dr. Judith Dienes of American Professors for Peace in the Middle East, Janet Parsons, member of Kibbutz Kfar Blum, Elaine K. Sirit, of United Jewish Appeal, and Priscilla Fishman, program director of the Jerusalem chapter of University Women. Ms. Parsons claimed that there are a wide variety of roles available to women on the kibbutz: this claim was not received very favorably by the audience. Dr. Dienes tried to put the halachic restrictions in a context and then proceeded to declare that women should be trained not only for times of emergency, but to serve at all times in industry and consumer services. Many women and men especially appreciated the remarks of Mrs. Sirit and Mrs. Fishman, who, it was felt, best understood the background and constraints of the audience they were addressing. There were quite a few questions directed to the panelists, and feeling ran high that there should have been even more time for discussion.

During the break between the session on Israel and that on Jewish Women in the Arts, a group of men left for an evening at the "schvitz"...and came back exhilarated.

The session on the arts proved to be one of the most exciting events of the conference. The talent on the panel was enormous and greatly respected. The biggest ovation went to Grace Paley, who read several of her short stories, and Muriel Alinsky, who not only read poetry but also talked about her Jewishness and its reflection in her art. The other panelists were Jean Boudin, poet, Deborah Rosenthal, painter, Margot Portnow, painter, Rachel Bus-Gohain, plastic artist, Roz Hollander, handicrafts expert, and Marsha Bonish, dancer. Quite a number of people in the audience stormed over Ms. Hollander's noodlepoint and felt creations, and hoped to be able to find patterns as beautiful as hers were. Ms. Bonish's solo, portraying Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones, was a magnificent piece of artistry and climaxed an extremely full and high-pitched day.
Three large workshops started Sunday’s program. Robberg Goldenberg led a group on the conflict between the goal of self-fulfillment and that of responsibility to the dictates and needs of the community. This has proved repeatedly to be a serious concern for men and women active in the Jewish Men’s and Women’s movements. Arthur Maskow presented a fascinating picture of the Jewish community of the future based on a study of Song of Songs. Dr. Maskow claims that the sexual imagery presented in that megillah is a reaction against rigid sex-role typing in ancient Israel, and that Jews today should look at the language of Shir ha-Shirim for guidance and role models. The third session was a panel of social scientist (Mrs. Stephen Cohen, Rica Josephs, and Margaret Wheeler) who held a round-table discussion, also involving the audience on the effects of modifying/eliminating sex-role differentiation on personality and the family structure.

Twelve mixed workshops ended the morning on a high note. Some of them were "repeats" of the separated workshops held on Shabbat, in recognition of the fact that women and men do share many of the same concerns. The topics included Feminine and Masculine in Jewish Mysticism, which lasted through Lunch, Work and Home: resolving tensions, Non-sexist Jewish education, Negotiating a Relationship, and Working on the Organization Power Structure.

Sunday afternoon was devoted to Tashlis workshops, i.e., topics that could and should lead to some kind of action. These sessions met on demand, and included Affirmative Halachic Action, Creating New Rituals, Curriculum: Informal and Formal, How to form a women’s group, On starting a Jewish Woman’s Coalition. Two groups actually worked on this coalition and center — one on the structure of the organization, the other on the purpose and content.

After a several hour break, during which all the conference participants were encouraged to attend the Soviet Jewry Solidarity Day Rally at the United Nations, the conference split up by sex. The men spent a long time evaluating their part of the conference and discussing how it was helpful anywhere it could have been even better. At the final wrap-up session, Arthur Maskow spoke for the men. They felt that there had not been enough male input into the planning of the conference (which we echo 100%). There was a man’s planning committee that never really got off the ground) and that the "separation" and "mixture" of the sexes should be delineated more clearly. The men felt that it had taken many of them a long time to warm up to each other and shed the intellectual veneer. In general, their feelings were very supportive and excited about the prospects for the future. A mailing list of all the men conferences will be distributed and many men from all over the country planned to stay in touch. A very recent development is that Response magazine is considering devoting an issue to the subject of the Jewish Man.

The women gathered to finalize plans for an interim organization to serve until a delegate convention could be called. The temporary constitution of the newly-named Jewish Feminist Organization passed unanimously and cheers. Enclosed is the preamble of the constitution:

We, Jewish feminists, have joined together here in strength and joy to struggle for the liberation of the Jewish woman. Jewish women of all ages, political, cultural and religious outlooks and sexual preferences, are all sisters. We are committed to the development of our full human potential and to the survival and enhancement of Jewish life. We seek nothing else than the full, direct and equal participation of women at all levels of Jewish life — communal, religious, educational and political. We shall be a force for such creative change in the Jewish community.
The five New York delegates (to represent the east coast) were elected on Sunday. They are: Leora Fishman, Judy Hauptman, Liz Kolten, Cheryl Moch, and Aviva Cantor Zuckoff. The Chicago (mid-west), Los Angeles (west coast), and Toronto (Canada) boards were to be elected in the very near future. JFO's temporary address is c/o Network, 36 West 37th Street, New York, New York, 10018.

The members of the regional boards will spend the next several months canvassing their areas for dues-paying membership, talking to and enlisting the support of the major Jewish women's organizations, and keeping in touch with each other to share ideas on how and where to run the JFO and exactly what its function should be. These ideas will be presented to the delegate convention within a year.

The last act of the conference was to support a declaration written by several male and female homosexuals at the conference. A loud "amen" was sounded after the resolution was read:

Whereas Jewish male and female homosexuals who identify themselves as Jews have been historically persecuted by some of the Jewish community, and gay men and women are openly discriminated against and excluded from participating within the framework of many Jewish institutions, therefore, let it be resolved that we, the members of the National Conference on Jewish Men and Women, urge: 1) that we recognize the historical persecution of homosexuals, 2) that the Jewish community, in acknowledging and accepting its gay members, open its doors to their full participation, 3) that Gay Rights legislation now before city council, and state legislators be supported by the Jewish lay and religious bodies.

The major accomplishments of this conference were felt to be the formation of the Jewish Feminist Organization and the first holding of the Jewish Men's Conference. There was a great deal of sentiment that there is now less need than ever for large national educational conferences such as this one was, and greater and greater needs for local seminars and pressure groups to work with synagogues, federations, Hebrew schools, etc.

The conference participants included representatives of several national Jewish women's organizations, and the feedback from them was quite positive. Perhaps more important, the younger women at the conference felt that they benefited tremendously from being able to interact personally and intimately with older women and women whose lifestyles differed from their own. There was tremendous hope that these organizations would support and be involved with the Jewish Feminist Organization in order to unite Jewish women of all ages and backgrounds in common causes.

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