

THE BECKERMAN KOLOT COLLECTION ON GENDER AND JUDAISM
AT THE RECONSTRUCTIONIST RABBINICAL COLLEGE LIBRARY

By Deborah Stern

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In its relatively short existence, Reconstructionist Judaism has a distinguished history and current reputation for promoting the equality of women in Judaism and fostering their ongoing contribution to the

Jewish civilization. Perhaps the origin of this lies in the fact that Mordecai Kaplan, its philosophical founder, had four daughters and no sons, which led to his orchestrating the first bat mitzvah ceremony on record, for his daughter Judith in 1922 at the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, the synagogue Kaplan founded that year. No picture is available of that momentous occasion, but here is a photo of Judith re-celebrating her bat mitzvah many years later.

What ever Kaplan's original motivation was, he continued to champion equality for women in Judaism. In 1936 he summed up his thinking in an essay in *The Jewish Reconstructionist Papers*, entitled "The Status of the Woman in Jewish Law." He wrote: "She must attain in Jewish law and practice a position of religious, civic and juridical equality with the man, and this attainment must come about through her own efforts and initiative...The Jewish woman must demand the equality due her as a right to which she is fully entitled...There is no reason why the Jewish civilization should persist in treating her in this day and age as though she were a minor, a half-wit, or a slave."

However, progress toward this end did not advance quickly. Though Kaplan continued to institute changes at his own synagogue, such as counting women in a minyan and calling women up for aliyot to the Torah, he also continued to perceive of Reconstructionism as a philosophy and resisted efforts by its adherents to form a separate movement in Judaism. Thus, Reconstructionism made slow progress creating its institutional components and women's issues also lay dormant for years. In 1940 the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation was founded and in 1954 a congregational arm was established, the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot, the predecessor to the current Jewish Reconstructionist Federation. But it wasn't until 1968, when the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College was founded and Reconstructionism finally became defined as the fourth movement in American Judaism that the tenets of this philosophy of Judaism, including the role of women, began to crystallize.

It was therefore quite surprising to me, contrary to general belief, that RRC did not decide to accept women from its beginning, given Kaplan's bold vision of women's equality in Judaism and the fact that Hebrew Union College had already done so. The editorial in *The Reconstructionist* journal in February, 1968, announcing the founding of RRC, called it "...a new type of school for rabbis..., a radical departure from the established methods of preparing men for the ministry." Apparently that radicalism was not of a feminine persuasion. According to Rabbi Rebecca Alpert, writing in *Jewish Women in America: an Historical Encyclopedia*, the college founders decided not to create added controversy by recruiting women for its first class. As late as July, 1969, another editorial in *The Reconstructionist* about the college notes under the heading "Women students," that the first female candidate has been considered. "If

admitted...she will pursue the same courses as the males. What has not yet been decided is the question of her receiving the title “Rabbi.”

It seems, however, that this issue was quickly resolved because Sandy Eisenberg Sasso began her rabbinical studies later that year and in 1974 graduated RRC as a rabbi, becoming the second American woman to do so. In that same year women made up half of the entering class at RRC and that trend has continued, recently tipping the balance in favor of women. Total graduates of RRC through 2005 include 155 men and 136 women, but from 2000-2005, 31 men and 42 women have completed the program.

For Reconstructionist Judaism the equality of women in all aspects of religious and juridical life soon became an absolute value. More gradually, a feminist Jewish vision was introduced into the movement and efforts made to integrate formal Jewish women’s studies into the RRC curriculum. In the late 1980’s, the Jewish Women’s Studies Project, or JWSP, was launched at the College, a joint student-faculty initiative. Among its accomplishments, this group brought in Jewish feminist scholars as speakers, workshop leaders, and as reviewers of curriculum; it established an annual prize for an essay on Jewish women’s studies; pressured the College to introduce courses in Jewish women’s studies and feminist theology, and set up Rosh Hodesh groups for girls living in the Philadelphia area, led by rabbinical students. The JWSP eventually morphed into a formal center at RRC in 1997, with Dr. Lori Lefkowitz as its Director. The new center was charged with developing a comprehensive program and advancing scholarship in Jewish women’s and gender studies, integrating Jewish women’s traditions into Jewish life and creating new liturgy and ritual, and recovering Jewish women’s history and voices. Soon after

Lefkovitz's hiring, the center added Kolot to its name and became Kolot: the Center for Jewish Women's and Gender Studies at RRC.

Although the College library always included resources on women and gender in Judaism, ours is a relatively small library, currently totaling some 48,000 volumes, 130 current journal titles, 150 audiovisuals, 10 computer files, and 6 online subscription databases, and our budget has to encompass all aspects of Jewish civilization and practical rabbinics. With the growing importance of Jewish women's and gender studies in the curriculum, it was vitally important that a way be found to insure the inclusion of these burgeoning resources in the library. In 2003, with the generous support of Susan Beckerman, board member of the College, the Beckerman Kolot Collection in Gender and Judaism was established at the college's Mordecai Kaplan Library. The sum of \$2500 was pledged annually to support purchases in the areas of Jewish women's studies, Judaism and gender, and Jewish women's literature, in order to guarantee a state of the field collection.. A selection of books, journals, and other appropriate media on these topics is made annually by me, the Library Director, in consultation with the Kolot Gottesman Professor of Gender and Judaism, and with recommendations also accepted from other faculty and students. Materials in the collection receive their own bookplate and are identified in the catalog. Thus, one can do a general keyword search for Beckerman Kolot in the catalog and retrieve all the titles designated as part of this collection, which now total 184 items.

Looking more closely at these 184 items, one can see these interesting details. There are five periodicals designated as part of the collection: *Bridges*, a journal for Jewish feminists published by the New Jewish Agenda; *Lilith*, probably the earliest Jewish feminist magazine in the U.S.;

Jewish Women's Literary Annual, published by the Jewish Women's Resource Center of the National Council of Jewish Women; *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, founded by Judith Plaskow; and *Nashim*, a journal of Jewish women's studies and gender issues co-sponsored by the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies in Israel and the International Research Institute on Jewish Women at Brandeis University.

The areas of Bible and text study and theology are represented by works by these foremost feminist thinkers: Penina Adelman, Athalya Brenner, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Elyse Goldstein, Naomi Graetz, RRC's own academic dean, the first at a rabbinic school, Tamar Kamionkowski, Carol Meyers, Vanessa Ochs, Alicia Ostriker, Judith Plaskow, and Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg. Jewish women's history is richly represented by these authors: Shulamit Reinharz, Barbara Hahn, Elisheva Baumgarten, Pamela Nadell, Hasia Diner, Riv-Ellen Prell, and Nehama Tec. Books exploring Jewish women's liturgy and ritual include those by Sharon Cohen Anisfeld, Sandy Falk, Gabrielle Kaplan-Mayer, and Chava Weissler. The topics of gender and feminist issues in Israel and in Orthodox Judaism are covered by works by Rachel Elijor, Ruth Halperin-Kaddari, Kalpana Misra, and Tamar Ross. Books about Jewish males and masculinity and books by males dealing with gender and sexuality in Judaism are also part of the collection. Authors include: Harry Brod, Shaye Cohen, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, Lawrence Fuchs, J.H. Henkin, Michael Satlow, and Peter Schafer.

Alongside its championing of women in the rabbinate, RRC and other branches of the Reconstructionist movement blazed the path for the acceptance of homosexuals as rabbis and as open and full participants in the life of its congregations. In 1984, after much study and

discussion among students and faculty, RRC adopted an admission policy barring “age, sex, marital status, sexual orientation and race” as determining factors. In 1993 a joint commission of the College, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, and the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation affirmed these welcoming policies for the rest of the movement. Thus, books on homosexuality as related to Judaism are included as well in the Beckerman Kolot collection, represented by authors such as Rebecca Alpert, Caryn Aviv, Daniel Boyarin, Angela Brown, and David Shneer.

Lastly, contemporary Jewish and Hebrew literature and poetry written by women comprises an important part of the Beckerman Kolot collection. Authors such as Marjorie Agosin, Maggie Anton, Ruth Ellenson, Dara Horn, Tova Mirvis, Marge Piercy, and Wendy Zierler are all included.

Today, Kolot has become an important and influential part of RRC, and in the wider Jewish community. Among the courses it currently sponsors at the College are: The Bible and the Feminist Imagination, The Body in Jewish Mystical Thought, and Queering Jewish Studies. It offers a graduate certificate in Jewish Women’s Studies in conjunction with Temple University to both matriculated and non-matriculated students. Kolot brings noted Jewish feminist speakers and authors to RRC and the larger Philadelphia community. The past year’s academic theme was “Jewish Men and Jewish Women in Popular Culture,” and it sponsored talks by Harry Brod, author of *A Mensch Among Men: Explorations in Jewish Masculinity*, and by Jennifer Weiner, whose book, *In Her Shoes*, was recently made into a popular movie. Kolot also maintains a

wonderful website called Ritualwell.org, where one can find, and also post, newly developed Jewish rituals and liturgy, many marking important occasions in women's lives.

I am proud to say that the Beckerman Kolot Library collection is one of the key components of Kolot's academic missions at RRC, as you can see from the Kolot website. With the establishment of this collection, the library can ably support Kolot's important work of training rabbinical students and advancing scholarship in the fields of Jewish women's and gender studies.

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