To my special husband,
Raffaele Gershom Fodde

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Introduction

The ivory tower is a comfortable, lofty perch from which scholars can view the world and engage in research and writing which they can share with other occupants equally versed in the ins and outs of academe. To support this lifestyle, they must occasionally and sometimes disdainfully descend into the classroom, there to share the fruits of their learned labors with a new generation. This transmission of scholarship from the ivory tower to the classroom is, however, not an easy process. The professor must translate and communicate a vast body of sophisticated knowledge to students who may still lack the skills to operate on his or her level and do so without compromising intellectual integrity.

This process is even more daunting when a scholar enters the public arena and attempts to communicate with a broader audience of laypersons alien to the rarified atmosphere of the academy. A few decades ago, Prof. Sara Reguer was invited to undertake such a daunting task. An accomplished scholar with bona fides in Middle Eastern studies, Jewish history, Jewish religious studies, and women's studies, her task was further complicated by her chosen venue: a Jewish newspaper with a primarily Orthodox Jewish target audience. To her many skills she now had to add a balancing act, striving to prudently communicate sensitive themes without compromising her standards or offending her readers.

This collection of essays, culled from over twenty years of her columns, is testimony to Prof. Reguer's multiple skills and her ability to communicate and educate on a variety of levels. Her writing is alternately informative and inspiring, passionate and poignant, and ranges from the comic to the tragic, all frequently peppered with personal insights and anecdotes. Her readers learned about the preservation of Jewish tradition during the Spanish Inquisition and the challenge of synagogue decorum in the time of Maimonides. A visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art

prompts an essay on Jewish art and a timely recommendation to acquire a reproduction of an illuminated Haggada.

Critical family issues such as childlessness, a husband's duties to his wife, matriarchy, and much more are sensitively covered alongside issues of death and burial. The collection includes many charming—sometimes humorous, sometimes poignant—vignettes. The description of her Cousin Feigel is most touching, and her account of the funeral conducted by her youthful father for a bird he accidentally killed is just one of several humorous moments in the book.

In sum, this collection provides a sweeping overview of Jewish life and culture as viewed through the eyes of an academic, equally at home in the real world and the ivory tower.

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Part I

Farewell Column

June 8, 2012

Over twenty-five years ago, when I was a scholar-in-residence at the Homowack Hotel, I was approached by a smiling older woman, who complimented me on the lecture I had just delivered on one of the Biblical women. "Let me introduce myself," she said. "My name is Irene Klass. My husband and I own *The Jewish Press*, and I would like you to write a column for us." Taken aback at the offer, I responded: "I don't think you would want me to write for you." Even more taken aback, she said: "Why not?"

"Because I am a modern Orthodox feminist, with an educated Litvak approach to Judaism." She paused and said: "Let me get back to you." And she did. "The offer still stands, but we reserve the right to edit your column."

"No, you either accept it as is, or you reject the entire thing. No one is to touch what I write."

"I'll get back to you." She did, and we agreed.

Over the years, there were only five columns that were totally rejected [four of which are included in this volume], and many others were tweaked by me, after negotiating with then-editor Sheila Abrams. One rejected one was on the Rubashkin scandal, one was on Puah Rakovsky, one was on my admiration for Vashti, and one was on modern day *agunot.* It is interesting to note that about a year after my column on the last topic was rejected, Mrs. Klass telephoned me to ask if I could write a more in-depth work on this topic to be used as one of their feature articles. *The Jewish Press* is now a major advocate on this issue, and my article is still used in classes on Jewish women in colleges across the country.

Over the years I have moved from the typewriter and the fax machine to email attachments. I got tired of writing only about Jewish women, so my column morphed into "Perspectives." I sent them in from Israel, Turkey, Italy, China, Hawaii, England, and from Camp Yavneh in New Hampshire. You got to know about my research, my classes at Brooklyn College, and about my family.

But things change. For example, my department imploded this year with three retirements. We will be hiring new professors over the next two years. The profile of the Department of Judaic Studies will thus inevitably change. This paper is reworking itself, and so this column will end. In the next few months I will be putting the finishing touches on my book, *The Most Tenacious of Minorities: The Jews of Italy*, as it heads to the presses. Then I will be able to return to my next project, which is half done, entitled *My Father's Journey: A Memoir of Lost Lithuanian Jewish Worlds*, which will cover his experiences, especially during World War I, and his relationship with the family he left behind in Brest-Litovsk, until the Nazis murdered them all. I have memoirs, letters from my grandfather, the *dayan* of Brisk, photographs, interviews, and my own recollections. It will not be an easy job, but I am constantly encouraged to finish it. I will. [It was published in 2015 by Academic Studies Press.]

So I thank my readers, many of whom have sent me interesting comments over the years. I was constantly surprised as to who read my column, and actually paid attention to what I wrote.

The Purim Play

March 1, 1996

The laws of Purim focus on the reading of the Scroll of Esther, the two foods of *mishloach manot*, and the festive meal. The central idea of Purim, that God saves Jews from destruction in the Diaspora in hidden ways, manifests itself through Jewish history in more personal or special Purims such as the Purim of Cairo (1524) and the Purim of Syracuse (1425).

An interesting creative offshoot of the holiday is the Purim play or *Purimspiel*, which took two forms in the Middle Ages. One form was a parody called *Masechet Purim,* which could have included a Purim "rabbi." This tradition still exists in many *yeshivot* today. The second form of the *Purimspiel* was something much more elaborate, which evolved into the complex dramas of the Renaissance in the northern Italian Jewish communities. At one time it was thought that the Italian *Carnivale*, which precedes the Christian season of Lent and thus corresponds roughly with the timing of Purim, was the influence on the Jewish Purim plays. However, research points in the other direction, for there are many historical instances of attacks on the Jews because of Purim plays which date back to the eleventh century. These public plays, which were parodies of the Purim story in which Haman and his sons were hanged, were seen by the suspicious Gentiles as parodies of local kings, dukes, princes, or church figures. It did not take much to provoke an attack on the small Jewish communities, as a result.

As the Renaissance began, the Purim plays became complex dramas acted out by men, women, boys, and girls, using elaborate costumes, scenery, and props. Gentiles were invited to attend these plays, and in 1489, a Purim play using the theme of the story of Judith and Holofernes was performed at a wedding of the House of Sforza in Pesaro. Some scholars who deal with this subject have concluded that it was the *Purimspiel* that influenced modern theater.

Purim plays exist today as well, but not on the level of those produced in Renaissance Italy. Nowadays, they are performed by boys and girls in their various schools. The younger the children, the more likely the script

will follow the actual Purim story, with most of the girls fighting over who should have the role of Esther. After all, how often is there a story in which the leading character is a woman? The boys, on the other hand, have a broader menu of leading characters—whether hero, villain, or stupid king. As the children get older the school plays—if they are still put on—become more sophisticated and may end up in the yeshiva-type parody of *Masechet Purim*, referred to above. I have some published variations of these parodies, and some are very creative indeed.

The only really public manifestation of Purim *a la Carnivale* is held in Israel and appropriately named *Ad De-Lo Yada*, in keeping with the custom that some Jews have of drinking liquor on Purim until the drinker does not know the difference between "*arur Haman u-barukh Mordekhai*," cursed is Haman and blessed is Mordekhai.

Women's Suffrage
Part 1

March 28, 1997

Soon after the Balfour Declaration was issued, Jewish activists both inside and outside Palestine began trying to set up an elected body to represent the *Yishuv*. One of the questions that arose dealt with the eligibility of women to vote for, or to be elected to, that representative body.

At the second Constitutive Assembly meeting in June 1918, women were given the right to vote, with a minimum age of twenty-five set for those women who might be elected. At the third assembly, held in December 1918, the Ashkenazi Old Yishuv representative stated that the group would not actively resist women's suffrage, although it opposed it, but it could absolutely not accept the right of women to be elected. The assembly rejected this, and the next few months saw the issue hotly debated in the Old Yishuv. In March 1919, the Ashkenazi leaders of the Old Yishuv proclaimed that it forbade women both to elect and to be elected.

Not all Ashkenazi Orthodox Jews in Palestine agreed with this stance. The Mizrachi in particular was divided. As a compromise, after months of disputing whether or not to vote in the first general elections, the election date was postponed until October 1919, and the newly instilled Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, Rabbi Abraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook (1895–1935) was empowered to participated in a rabbinic forum, representing the "moderates." Yet, to the shock of these moderates, Rabbi Kook came out with an unequivocal rejection of women's suffrage. The Mizrachi again obtained a postponement of the elections, and the World Executive of that party came out in March 1920 with a decision in favor of the election as proposed, i.e., giving women the right to vote. Rabbi Kook stood his ground on *halakhic* reasons, and the debate continued until 1925.

Rabbi Kook wrote two Responsa (*teshuvot*) spelling out his *halakhic* principles. In his first Responsum, he stated that there were three aspects to the issue and that he was addressing all three. The first was the *halakhic* aspect, which was directed to the Jews, whose first loyalty was to Judaism.

The second was the national aspect, namely, what was best for the new Zionist national home. The third was the moral aspect, directed at those for whom this was their primary outlook.

He stated that Judaism opposed women's suffrage for two reasons. First, because the roles requiring initiative and action in Jewish tradition are only for men. This includes political roles, judicial office, and testifying in court. Also, the Torah always sought to separate the genders in public gatherings. Women entering politics would transgress both norms.

From the national aspect, it should be recognized that Great Britain's attitude to the Jewish homeland was based on her recognition of the Biblical connection. The Biblical role for women was that of homemaker. To prevent the enemies of Zionism from claiming that the Jews of today are no longer connected to the Bible, it required Zionists to reject women's suffrage, thus strengthening the world's positive perception of the Biblical tie.

Third, from the moral aspect, social relations between the sexes would not be free from immorality. This could only take place in the messianic period. Preempting the future by allowing women to become politically active now would delay the messianic coming.

In his second Responsum (April 1920), Rabbi Kook showed the essential difference between the centrality of the family in Jewish and Gentile Society. For the latter, the family was not the cornerstone of society as it was for the Jews. For the Gentiles, who have low regard for their women, the women must attempt to rectify the bad treatment through politics. But Jewish women were well treated and highly regarded; should they be thrust into the strife of politics, this would enter the home and destroy harmony.

Women's Suffrage
Part 2

April 11, 1997

The main opponent of Rabbi Kook's opinions against women's suffrage was Rabbi Benzion Meir Hai Uzziel (1880–1953). Born in the Old City of Jerusalem to an illustrious Sephardi family, Rav Uzziel eventually served as the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of mandatory Palestine and was the first Sephardi chief rabbi of the State of Israel, a post he held until his death.

Rabbi Uzziel divided his Responsum into two issues: women's right to vote, and their right to be elected to public office. With regard to the first issue, he stated that reason led to the recognition of women's right to vote and that without unequivocal proof that the Torah denied such a right, *halakha* subscribed to reason. Elections were nothing but the delegation of authority to representatives, enabling them to act in a binding manner in the name of the electors. Women would be expected to be bound by the results of an election. Reason states, thus, that if women are bound to obey those elected, they should not be denied the right to participate in the elections.

Some, he wrote, claim that women do not have the mental capacity to vote because their "minds are frivolous." But are not many men like this too? Women have always been as clearheaded and intelligent as men. *Halakha* itself recognizes this in civil law. As for voting leading to immoral public behavior, Rabbi Uzziel wrote that the genders mixed in public places, especially in commercial negotiations every day. What immorality could there be in casting a vote in a poll office? That voting would disrupt home tranquility was patently absurd, since differences of opinion among adults were not out of place and a loving family environment would not be damaged by such differences.

Rabbi Uzziel thus did not accept the norm of Rabbi Kook that what was done and said in the past is definitive of what should be done in the present. (Within this mind-set, "innovation" is a negative factor.) Rabbi Uzziel accepted the premise that present issues must derive from principle:

in the case of women's suffrage, from the self-evident principles of equity and human dignity. The basic unit of the modern polity is not the family but the adult individual, and women who were also "created in the Divine image" are included in the term "adult individual."

The assumption of most people, when coming to an issue such as women's suffrage, is that European rabbis would be open to such modern innovations, while "Oriental" traditionalism would be committed to the religious status quo. Yet, as we see, however original Rabbi Kook was in Jewish thought and Zionism, with regard to *halakha*, Rabbi Kook adhered to a right-wing, even reactionary genre. This may have been because European Jewry was threatened by changes in Judaism made by the Reform movement and so responded with fear to any "innovation." Middle Eastern and Sephardi Jews had no such experience and so felt free to continue to innovate, which to them was not a sign of modernism but of traditionalism. Rabbi Uzziel had many prominent adherents from both the Ashkenazi and Sephardi rabbis. The issue of women's suffrage became a moot point when the Yishuv's quasi-government enacted laws giving women both the vote and the ability to hold office. Mandated Palestine thus joined most northern European states and the United States in granting women suffrage. It is hard for us to imagine that this was one of the burning issues of the early twentieth century.

The Spanish Inquisition

May 22, 1998

The Inquisition, the special permanent tribunal of the medieval Catholic Church, was established to investigate and combat heresy. It was instituted by Pope Gregory IX in 1233 CE, and the mission of judging heretics was given to the Dominican order, which divided the duties with the Franciscan order. The tribunal directed its activities against Christian heretics, not against Jews. So, how did the Inquisition become almost synonymous with the torture of Jews?

In Spain, in the years 1391 and 1412 at the time of anti-Jewish riots, hundreds of Jews temporarily converted to Christianity in order to save their lives. In their minds this was temporary, however, in the minds of the church authorities, this was permanent. Thus, with the arrival of the Inquisition into Spain in 1481, one of its targets of possible heresy was this easily identifiable group of "New Christians" or *Conversos* (known pejoratively as *marranos*).

Starting in the province of Andalusia, the activities of the Inquisition against the *Conversos* spread to Aragon, Catalonia, and Valencia, under the able and fanatical leadership of Tomas de Torquemada, appointed Inquisitor General in 1483. These activities had the support of the rulers of Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella.

Arrested *Conversos* had a thirty to forty day "period of grace" during which time the Inquisition gathered evidence, and the person sat in prison in complete ignorance of his or her accusers and accusations. Torture was then used to extract "confessions," and punishments were meted out according to the Inquisitor's decision. The *Converso* could be sent to the galleys or to prison; his or her family could suffer; and property could be confiscated. Most serious of all would be the death penalty, and since this punishment had to be meted out "without blood," it was via the *auto-da-fe*, or burning at the stake. This was done in a very public manner, with a procession before a huge crowd, with the doomed person dressed in a *sanbenito* or long yellow robe with a black cross on it, and a tall miter.

Sermons were delivered as the crowd waited impatiently for the main attraction—the pyre.

The activities of the Inquisition are recorded in detail. But in reading these archives, not only do we find evidence of them but we also gain insight into the lives of the *Conversos*. Women's connections to Judaism are particularly strong, according to the records. In addition to the focus on the fast of Yom Kippur—a holiday easier to observe than Passover with the secret baking of matza and having a kind of *seder*—women were specifically involved in the preparation of Shabbat lamps, both in devising systems to keep the oil burning longer, as well as in preparing the wicks. The women cleaned the house and prepared food on Friday, changing clothing and linens as well as dressing festively. But gradually, intention often had to replace deed, as the Inquisition's spies checked all of these activities. The exception was women's lighting Sabbath lights; this continues in secret.

As the decades passed, women developed special *Converso* traditions such as immersion and bathing prior to the Sabbath. The ablutions were often performed in a group, when *Converso* women gather to visit among themselves. They had to choose safe ways in which to hide their ritual acts, and since many *Conversos* had pools in their homes, this could be done in relative privacy. Thus we see the merging of bathing before the Sabbath with ritual immersion for married women. We also know of ritual immersions performed by brides, since some were performed in streams and thus open to spying eyes.

A whole system for observing the rites connected with death and burial comes to light via the Inquisition documents, as does a special oath sworn by *Conversos* among themselves. There were Bibles and prayer books and books of Jewish laws in the early stages, when Hebrew was still read. But as years passed, these books were revered only for what they represented.

The expulsion of 1492 was directed mainly at separating the *Conversos* from the "bad" influence of the Spanish Jews. But the *Converso* practicing of Judaism continued, and those who could left the Iberian Peninsula for safer havens. Sometimes the long arm of the Inquisition followed them to these places, such as Italy and Mexico. Those who did not leave continued to practice secret rites and rituals until the connection with Judaism was almost totally forgotten.

Synagogue Decorum

June 18, 1998

Proper decorum in the synagogue is a constant topic of discussion in my house of worship. My rabbi tried everything he could think of to get the men to keep quiet during prayers. There is also a constant flow of people to and from in both the men's and women's sections. The only time when almost everyone is quiet and still is during the sermon.

Within the stream of history, my synagogue is not unique. During the Cairo Geniza period, the excessive length of the service, the reading by laymen of texts that had to be chanted according to fixed rules, the personal rivalries and public dissentions encouraged by specific synagogue procedures (such as who got which honor), and, in general, the fact that the synagogue also served as a courthouse and clubhouse where the men spent most of their free time—all must have seriously impaired the character of the synagogue as a house of worship. Moses Maimonides and his son Abraham decried the constant lack of decorum in the Cairo synagogues. Other Geniza documents even mention brawls in local synagogues on Shabbat, leading to cessation of the morning service. In a letter from Ramla, dated September 1052, a fistfight is reported in the synagogue between pilgrims from Tyre and Tiberias on Yom Kippur that was so fierce the police were called in.

In the early part of the service—certainly until well into the Torah reading—the women are not the focus of the rabbi's exhortation to be quiet. There is a simple reason for that: most are not there yet. Since women don't have a fixed time for saying the *Shema*—which is one of the seven time-bound positive commandments from which women are exempt—women are not obligated to be in the synagogue for it. Women with young children also have to dress them as well as themselves. Yet most women do go to the synagogue, and most do make it on time for the sermon and *Musaf*. Those who are more particular make it in time to hear the Torah portion. This is in keeping with what we know of the women's synagogue attendance in time of prosperity in medieval Cairo, Renaissance Florence, Muslim Cordoba, and nineteenth-century Frankfort. Similar, too, is the