INTERVIEW WITH JUDITH PLASKOW
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Judith, you are probably the most important Jewish feminist today.

Thank you.

You introduced gender as the category through which we should understand Judaism, insisting that we interpret the Jewish tradition through that particular lens. Before we explore what it means to be a Jewish feminist, please tell us about your intellectual trajectory. How did you come to the realization that Judaism needs to be reconceptualized from the particular perspective of gender?

I became a feminist in the fall of 1969 when I was a graduate student at Yale. That was the year that Yale admitted women to the undergraduate college and prepared for women's education by installing full-length mirrors in the bathrooms and hiring a gynecologist in the health center. Three graduate women in the social sciences responded by calling a meeting to discuss how it was that there had been women graduate students at Yale for eighty years and no one had noticed. I was a graduate student in religious studies at the time and did not consider myself a feminist, but I went to the meeting because I was interested and curious. We started meeting weekly for both consciousness raising and activism, and over the course of that year I became a feminist. One of the other women involved in the group was Carol P. Christ, with whom I would collaborate throughout my academic career. We started asking questions about our studies. Why was it that we had never read a single book or article written by a woman? Until we became feminists, we hadn't noticed that lacuna.

My feminist awareness also had a profound impact on my Jewish life. In the summer of 1969, I married Robert Goldenberg, who was a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary and a Conservative rabbi (though also an academic). I grew up a Reform Jew, but I began to take on more serious Jewish practice when I married. So I became a feminist at exactly
the moment that I was sitting in the back of the Orthodox men's minyan in Yale Chapel. One Shabbat morning, my husband and I were standing outside chatting with a friend and one of the undergraduates came out and asked him to come in to make the minyan. That was a very important “click” moment for me. I realized that, although I had been attending services for a year and a half, and my husband had just started, because I was a woman, I was completely irrelevant to the purpose for which we were gathered. I said to myself: “Never again! I'm never walking into a congregation that doesn't count women.” That was the point at which I started to raise questions about Judaism, examining it from a feminist perspective.

What was the importance of the fact that you became a feminist at Yale Divinity School? How did the Divinity School and Yale University in general affect your approach to gender issues?

I've often asked myself that question. On the one hand, I regret having gone to Yale because it was an awful experience. It was a deeply, deeply sexist institution. On the other hand, part of me wonders whether I would have become a feminist when I did had I not been at Yale. The number of women in the program was very small (10 percent at our peak), and we were subjected to constant surveillance: were we going to make it academically? That question was on everyone's minds, and we had the feeling that we were being watched in a different way from the male students. Here's an anecdote that illustrates our status. In one of my courses, we were reading Schubert Ogden's *The Reality of God*. It was my first exposure to liberal theology, and I was both upset by the book and intrigued by it and really struggled with its arguments. In the course of the discussion, a male student patted me on the head and said, “Don't worry your little head about it.” That was the kind of constant paternalism that we were subjected to. And when Carol and I became feminists, it became even worse, because we were more aware of the condescending treatment and the men became more uncomfortable with our criticism. For example, every time we came to a door, the men would ask: should we open the door for them? Are they going to be angry at us? As you recall, the custom was for men to open the door for women, but feminism had challenged that social convention in the name of equality. So I think that being at Yale, an old bastion of (male) privilege, actually made me a staunter feminist. Being a graduate student in religious studies meant that I was bringing my feminist questions to the field of religious studies and eventually to Judaism.