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God subjugates man, and man subjugates his wife

Dr. Tamar Ross, who feels she is part of the Torah world, is an outspoken critic of masculine-based theology

By Yair Sheleg

The appearance of Dr. Tamar Ross is misleading, and she likes it that way. Her head covering, a kerchief that covers almost all of her hair, rather than a fashionable hat as is common among religious Zionist women, makes her look ultra-Orthodox. But in her religious view, Ross is a daring feminist theologian.

One could even say that Ross is one of three central figures in religious feminism in Israel: Prof. Alice Shalvi supplied the educational aspect (at the Pelech High School for girls in Jerusalem), Dr. Chana Kehat supplied the public aspect (in the women's organization Kolech) and Ross, who is not as well-known, supplied the theological foundation when she did not hesitate to speak about the "masculine bias of the Jewish sources."

Last Wednesday, when her colleagues at Bar-Ilan University organized a conference in her honor prior to her retirement, they described her as "the leader of an entire generation of *talmidot hakhamim* [female Torah scholars]."

Her words about the need to acknowledge the masculine bias of the sources caused an uproar twice – one positive, the other negative. In 1996, she was invited to speak at the first conference of JOFA, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, in the United States. At first she was hesitant: "In social terms, the participants in the conference seemed to me to be on the far left of Orthodoxy, and I saw myself as being more inside the Torah world." For that reason she conditioned her participation on being allowed to speak not about the politics of feminism, but about theology.

And that is what happened: Ross spoke about the need to acknowledge that the Jewish sources, including the earliest and most sacred ones such as the Bible, reflect the spirit of their times, a spirit



Lamor Edrey

Professor Ross: She created a generation of female Torah scholars.

of masculine dominance, and therefore it is legitimate that in other times, these sources, as well as reality itself, be ascribed a different, feminist meaning.

"The atmosphere in the hall was electric," she says, recalling the event. "I felt that I had touched on something that many religious women had felt but had never dared to voice in public."

A year later she was invited to another conference, an annual forum organized by Yeshiva University (the bastion of the educated Orthodox of American Jewry), which brings together rabbis and religious academicians to discuss current problems. "Already, when I sent them the text of the lecture, I encountered suspicion," she says. "After I spoke, there was an uproar, people attacked me harshly."

She developed her theology, she says, not from a feminist starting point but out

of a basic religious need: "The idea was to treat the feminist question as a test case for the question of how the belief in Torah from Heaven confronts our sense that the sources contain quite a number of problems, such as, for example, the masculine bias. When I say 'masculine bias' I am referring not only to the fact that God is called 'He' rather than 'She,' and not only to the fact that there are many halakhot [religious laws] that discriminate in favor of the man, but to the fact that the perception of reality comes from a masculine point of view.

"In the first chapters of Genesis [the chapters about the creation – Y.S.], God is portrayed as someone who creates something outside of Himself. Women would describe that simply as birth, and, in fact, the Kabbala, which is considered more suitable to the feminine point of view, does in fact describe it in that way.

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But, in general, a feminist reading demonstrates that the attitude of the Torah toward God is like the attitude of a son toward a father, treating him as a ruler, and not like the attitude of a daughter towards a mother, which is much more intimate and physical.

"There is also a parallel between God's attitude toward man and the attitude of the man toward his wife: God subjugates man, and man, in this spirit, subjugates his wife."

'Ongoing revelation'

To resolve the tension between this feeling and the belief in the everlasting sacredness of the Torah, Ross developed her idea of "the ongoing revelation": "The simplistic approach prevalent in Orthodoxy claims that the Torah came from Heaven and was transmitted as is by Moses. But anyone with eyes in his head understands that an experience of communication with God – no matter what the nature of this concept – undergoes a dual interpretation: First of all, the communicator processes it into his concepts, and when he transmits it further, he processes it into the concepts of the listeners."

Simply put: Just as Moses processed the word of God into the (masculine) terms prevalent in his era, in the same way the following generations can process it according to the terms of their era.

Ross was born in 1938 to Miriam and Yerahmiel Elimelekh Wohlgerlerner. Her father was a rabbi and a member of the Hapoel Hamizrachi Zionist movement in Detroit. "My father studied Torah with me for two hours every day," she says, "and when he was unable to do so, he hired teachers for me."

Ross finished high school at the age of 16, and immigrated to Israel by herself; in Israel she was introduced to the

circle of students of the Merkaz Harav Yeshiva, "Haimke Druckman, Moshe Levinger, Dov Lior, Eliezer Waldman" and through them to the teachings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, which had a profound influence on her. She says that her own revolutionary theology is based on his views:

"From him I learned that God is revealed not only in the text but in historical events as well, so that if the Torah was given in a certain generation, which was a patriarchal one, and we are now living in a period that is creating the conditions for a different perception, both the old and the new perceptions are from God."

'Even in a society where a woman's hair is not necessarily a sexual stimulant, covering one's hair today also has a meaning of communal identity. The same is true of family purity laws,' says Ross.

She herself gave birth to and raised seven children, and began her academic career late, and with many interruptions: "In the first place, I went to study only in order to enrich my knowledge. At first I registered for international relations, but I soon discovered that it wasn't my field, and I registered for Jewish studies. I completed my doctorate about the Mussar movement [a movement that developed among Lithuanian Jewry in the 19th century and emphasized the need for improving one's ethical behavior – Y.S.] at the age of 49, only after my sev-

enth daughter had already grown up."

Ross says she was not even looking for a job in the academic world. In 1976, in her neighborhood in Jerusalem, she met the wife of Rabbi Haim Brovender, who at the time had started the first post-high school yeshiva for girls, Midreshet Bruria. It turned out that he needed someone to teach Jewish philosophy, and at the time Ross was in the middle of studying for her master's degree. She began to teach in a project that eventually gave rise to an entire network of Torah-study institutions for women, and thus made a contribution to the religious feminist revolution.

Eventually she was invited to teach in the Jewish philosophy department at Bar-Ilan. She began to teach about the Mussar movement, went over to teaching about the object of her admiration, Rabbi Kook, and in recent years, since publishing her revolutionary thesis, she has focused on feminism, in the new department of gender studies at the university.

Ross is much more conservative in her lifestyle than one would expect from her theology. It is her sociological outlook to religious life that enables her to adhere to very non-feminist approaches because of the other meanings they have acquired: "Even in a society where a woman's hair is not necessarily a sexual stimulant, covering one's hair today also has a meaning of communal identity. The same is true of family purity laws. Feminism claims that they stem from a demonic fear of a woman's sexual power, but one cannot skip over 2,000 years of religious interpretation, and, in my opinion, these things already have an independent vitality, just as we won't abolish the three *regalim* [Pesah, Shavuot and Sukkot] just because originally their significance was agricultural, and we won't abolish Hanukkah just because of its pagan origin."