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Women's Whispers: Black fire upon white fire

By [VIVA HAMMER](#)
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Weeks before I left Australia forever, bulldozing through law school exams, I was called on to form a women's prayer group. I had only myself to blame for this. Ever since returning from America, aglow with the freshest things in the Jewish world, I had been speaking at every corner about women gathering in prayer. A flurry of young voices implored me to recreate the experience in the Antipodes.

Much was at stake for me in those final weeks of study, but I could not refuse the pleadings, and the preparations began.

Men's prayer comes together so naturally, so effortlessly. Novices train and observe with the experts until the moment of readiness, when the baton passes unnoticed. Every day, twice a day, a boy waits for his moment, while his sister waits at home. Creating a prayer service of girls, who have spent their lives waiting at home, never having apprenticed or even mingled with the performers, is like conducting a symphony with an orchestra of nursery children. You might lose a few notes.

Volunteers gathered: One girl had the urge to read Torah and an elder wished to impart the alchemy of the Torah tunes, as he had to generations of our brothers.

The Liberal rabbi lent a Torah scroll, and my parents opened their home. We planned to meet on a Sunday Rosh Hodesh; we could all sing Hallel – but could we lead one another in song?

Planning was secret. A few years before, the REITS 5 – Yeshiva University rabbis – had flung out a denunciation of women's prayer groups, and ugly scenes sometimes flared when they started across America. I knew that opposition was possible, perhaps inevitable, and I wanted to avoid a conflagration as long as possible.

I hoped in vain. One day I answered the phone to a caller I had never spoken to before: the rabbi of a large mostly empty synagogue, who by his training and garb would be labeled Modern Orthodox. On another day, a hassidic rabbi phoned. Both spat abuse at me for several hours.

I cannot remember which one said what. Their irrationality, heavy-handedness and inappropriateness made it all sound like one voice. I was a mischief-maker, they said, causing a schism. A whole new denomination of Judaism would spring up they prophesized. The denomination of women's prayers? I wondered.

“Who are these women attracted to this thing?” They demanded. “Marginal, dissatisfied types. They will spread the word to other women, who are happy in their roles, make them question, put evil thoughts in their heads.” I doubted that contented women would be affected by this at all. And if they are led to questions because of our quiet prayers, are you so sure that they are contented?

“And your women, do they *daven* every day? Why are they suddenly enthusiastic about a Sunday morning service? Why don’t they go to a real shul in the morning and hear a real Torah reading if they are so keen?”

Then they dug at me with legal arguments. “How can you cart around a sefer Torah like that? It’s a desecration to open it for an unholy purpose! Are you going to say blessings over the reading?” They concluded with curses. I was a cursed woman for my brazenness, my disrespect of tradition, of the sefer Torah, of the community.

I cried: it was horrible being cursed, even by rabbis who talked a jumble of nonsense. They did not deter me, but my father almost did. We were walking to shul one night and my father confided he had been denied an aliya because of my activities.

“Viva, my darling, I am asking you: *please don’t do this thing.*”

“How can you ask me this?” I responded, shocked. “You have supported me from the beginning!” My father pleaded with me. “When I was teaching under communism, being a frum Jew became almost impossible. Kashrut, Shabbat, davening – if it would have become known that I was keeping these...” He grimaced, remembering. “I know this is important to you, but I can’t bear that people will turn their heads away from me because of it. I have been through so much.”

I should have dissolved, capitulated, thrown it all away, but I sensed my father was paranoid. I told him gently I couldn’t give it up; I refused to be cowered by the rabbis as if they were Stalin’s flunkies. Australia was a free country.

Soon after, the rabbi of our shul offered to lend prayer books for our service. I was so immensely relieved: Clearly my father had not been denied synagogue honors by his rabbi. The women’s spiritual needs would not be satisfied at the cost of my father’s.

Rosh Hodesh came; 23 women and a sefer Torah packed into our living room. The voices were halting; none was used to being welcomed to sing together. But the real glory was hearing the brief gasps of the women called to the Torah, watching those lithe black figures pulsing across the incandescent scroll: black fire upon white fire.

I took my exams, flew off to America. Fifteen years later, one of the rabbis who had cursed me wrote asking for forgiveness. He held a women’s prayer group in his own synagogue now, he said.

How could I respond?

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