

CHAPTER SIX

THE CULTURAL CONTEXTUALIZATION OF ORTHODOX FEMINIST IDENTITY

In this chapter, I focus on the narratives of 25 interviewees who self-identified as Orthodox feminists. I suggest that their stories serve as a lens both into their struggle to make sense of an identity that on the surface seems fraught with contradictions, as well as into the cultural context in which they function.

To date, studies on gender and conservative religion have pointed to the growing feminist sensibilities that have taken form among women, all the while as they avoid or reject the feminist label (Fishman 1993, 2001; Gallagher and Smith 1999; Manning 1999). In many ways, the position of these women vis-à-vis feminism is consistent with that of many non-religious women who also distance themselves from feminist self-identification while supporting many issues that can be considered feminist. Misciagno (1997) categorizes such women as de-facto feminists; Stacey (1990) talks about such women as post-feminists; Badran (1994) uses the term pro-feminists.

Yet, in past decades, feminist oriented research has shown how different versions and understandings of feminism are being produced from within different cultures (Baca Zinn and Dill 1996; Harnois 2005; Badran 1994, 2007; Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Kaplan 1994; Narayan and Harding 2000; Oyewumi 2003; Smith and Censer 2000). The narratives of some of the women in the previous chapter indicate that there is a trend in Orthodoxy that seeks to change the way their communities think about and “do” gender. Such voices can also be heard among women from within Catholicism (Ecklund 2003, Farrell 1991; Henold 2008), Evangelicalism (Ingersoll 2003; Stock 1997; Bartkowski 1997) and Orthodox Judaism (Koren 2005, Sered 1990).

Growing Up Orthodox: Early Gendered Experiences and Feminist Sensibilities

Many of the interviewees talked about having a sub-feminist consciousness throughout their lives; they were aware of gender discrimination and

I accepted what he said because actually my world until then was very patriarchal. I prayed behind a *mezhitza*, my father said Kiddush and the prayer of the bread. These things didn't spark a light or anger me—everyone has his own functions and I didn't feel put down in any way. But, it was a very genuine answer that I gave him, and I think that my enlisting into the army was the first time that I was in my own care. I enlisted in the educational branch of the army and became a captain. I was very independent.

Another area over which the interviewees were keenly aware of the separate gender roles for men and women and had to navigate through them was in ritual matters. Rinat reflects on this and talked about her feelings during her youth:

I remember when I was five years old thinking, why am I going to a *shalom zachar* [ceremony for the birth of a boy], why isn't there such a thing for girls, why is there a party when a boy is born and not a girl. I could not understand that and I remember even asking that question and not getting very good answers... And I remember when I was in high school... for a certain period of time I insisted on doing Kiddush [prayer over the wine] in the house and I didn't understand why only men did Kiddush, it did not make sense to me. I remember around the time of my *bat mitzvah* something seemed wrong. I didn't have a *bat mitzvah* party, I had a sweet 16. That seemed wrong to me.

Overall, the narratives of these modern Orthodox feminists point to the uniqueness of their particular cultural context in which issues of religious learning and exclusion from ritual are central. They also point to the particular framework shared by conservative religious groups more generally, a context in which strict gender roles are assigned, taught, and reinforced. Such voices are echoed in other studies on feminist sensibilities within conservative religions and their institutions (Cadge 2004; Erickson and Farrell 2005; Hartman 2002; Ingersoll 2003; Stock 1997; Wallace 1988).

Awareness of Jewish Feminist Writings and Networks as a Factor²

Studies on feminist identity reveal that exposure to feminism increases the chances for women to identify as feminists (Aronson 2003; Henderson-

² The experience of becoming involved in a feminist organization also differs in many ways from becoming aware of feminism through feminist writings. Nevertheless, there is an underlying shared theme in these experiences as both are venues through which women gain knowledge of Orthodox feminism. Hence, I discuss them here through a single categorization.

King & Stewart 1999; Reid and Purcell 2004). While these studies tend to focus on women gaining feminist knowledge from a classroom setting, the women whom I interviewed gained such knowledge from reading books about Jewish feminism (primarily Orthodox feminism) and taking part in an Orthodox feminist organization. Like in the latter section, the centrality of the Orthodox context in shaping the women's feminist experience is again revealed. In other words, it is not through problematic issues of gender and society (i.e. women's status at work, abortion issues, etc.) that draws Orthodox women to identify as feminists, but rather through problematic issues of gender and Judaism in particular.

For Hadas, it was Blu Greenberg's (1981) influential book *On Women and Judaism* in particular that inspired her to become a feminist:

When I read her book I said to myself, finally I found something that I agree with. Never before had I read something that I really agreed with in that area. Things that were previously written by Orthodox writers addressed the issue [of gender] superficially. Things [regarding women's status in Judaism] that were written by Conservative or Reform activists and I could not relate to. For the first time, I read someone who I agreed with and said, okay, if she can write like that then I can talk in the same way.

Likewise, Rina was influenced by Jewish feminist writing. She says:

I started reading up on feminism and Judaism. The first book that I read was Susan Heschel's [1995] book *On Being a Jewish Feminist*. A friend of mine gave me that book and it changed a lot of things for me. It gave me a language to talk about things that I was really feeling.

Having a shared language, as Rina puts it, or a shared discourse, is an important step in the development of a feminist identity. In this vein, an additional experience that some interviewees noted as formative in shaping their feminist identity was tied to their affiliation with Kolech. This organizational framework gave the women a venue to both learn more about the problematic gender issues facing Orthodoxy and to feel connected to other women who were bothered by these issues and want solutions. Adi, for example, says that when she first heard of Kolech from a friend, he sarcastically said to her, "Look you are not alone, there are other women who think and speak just as crazy as you do."

Even from this cynical angle, the importance of "women who think and speak" in the same way cannot be ignored. Adi, like a number of women in this study, began to self-identify as a feminist after she joined Kolech. As Adi mentions regarding her friend's cynical comment, before her affiliation with Kolech, she felt like she was alone in her views. The thought of

calling these views feminist and working towards change was not something she had given much thought to before connecting with Kolech.

Expressing the significance of Kolech as a “safe place” to share their feelings and push for change together, Miri, who became one of the leading figures in Kolech, talked about the first time she met Hana Kehat, the founder of Kolech.

I think I joined Kolech probably a year or year and a half after it was founded. Suddenly I heard that there was an organization that gives a place for women, and thought—an organization like that I support. I joined as a member so that I could learn more. I remember that I saw Hana Kehat in the elevator at some conference. I turned to her and told her that I want to be more involved. She wrote my phone number down and I began taking on different positions in the organization immediately...

Adi and Miri are examples of women who clearly had a feminist consciousness before Kolech but had no network to which to turn with their thoughts and gain support. Kolech gave them the space to feel more comfortable with their position and be part of a movement advancing an agenda that they believed in.

The feeling of sisterhood and confidence that joining a feminist organization provides is highly instrumental in shaping a feminist identity (Duncan 1999; Oyewumi 2003). In my research, I witnessed this feminist transformation in a woman who had just joined Kolech. When I interviewed Sofi she had started taking part in a women’s group organized by Kolech that met every *Rosh Chodesh* (first day of the Jewish month). At the time, when I asked her about feminism she gave the well-known response, “Women’s issues are important to me... but I wouldn’t say that I am a *feminist*” (the italics serve to emphasize the exaggerated tone in which she stated the word ‘feminist’). Over the years, Sofi became more involved in Kolech and I began to see her at the organization’s many meetings and conferences which I observed. Four years later at one of these conferences, Sofi stood on the platform, speaking in the name of Kolech and in the name of Orthodox feminism, and gave a very emotional speech about the need to reach out to women to learn about feminism and get involved in the Orthodox feminist movement.

Sofi’s “discovery of feminism” is a clear case of what is discussed in social psychology as the significance of becoming part of group. When individuals align themselves with a particular group, the characteristics of that group become standards for their thoughts, feelings, and actions (Michener, Dalamater, and Myers 2004).

By and large, the framework that Kolech provides as a space for women to openly discuss their perspective and emotions gives a sense of confidence and security to many of the affiliates that I interviewed. As Moriah puts it, “[Kolech] is not only a place where we fight against oppression but also where we celebrate women’s achievements.” Without such a framework, one of the interviewees says that women who have feminist sensibilities are left feeling isolated: “To be an Orthodox women and a feminist can feel very lonely.” In this vein, one of the initial founders of Kolech talked about the sense of relief that she felt when she was part of the first Kolech meeting and found that so many other women thought as she did.

While being part of a framework that gives a sense of sisterhood was important in sustaining their feminist identity, for most of the interviewees, their feminist journey consisted of a combination of factors that appeared gradually over time. In fact, as the following section describes, the element of time itself was a crucial part of some of the women’s experiences.

“Coming of Age” as a Factor

Schnittker, Freese and Powell (2003) have noted the significance of age in feminist identification. They found that women who are currently middle age, or slightly older, are more likely to identify with feminism than the younger generation of women. They attribute this to shared experiences in young adulthood. More specifically they argue that individuals who lived through the height of second-wave feminism in their formative young adult years are more likely to identify as feminists than those who did not have such an experience.

The findings from my study on Orthodox feminists point to a different relationship between age and feminist identification—i.e. that in fact middle age years are most formative to the shaping of feminist identity. The case for a connection between experiences in middle age and feminist identity has been raised before. Gloria Steinem (1983), the well-known second wave feminist, argues that women in middle age have had more life experiences that lead them towards feminism than younger women. Therefore, they are more likely to identify as such. To an extent, my findings help substantiate her hypothesis. However, there are aspects of the “coming of age” factor that also suggest the particularity of this dimension for women in conservative religion.

Many of the interviewees revealed that for them, age brought with it a maturity and confidence in taking on a feminist identity that would have been far more difficult to maintain during their youth. That is, by around middle age, these women felt that they had less at stake for being seen as deviant for affiliating with feminism than the younger generation who are far more concerned with establishing themselves within the Orthodox community, finding a partner, and starting a family. For them, affiliating with feminism may harm such prospects. Fishman's (2001) study on young modern Orthodox women confirms this analysis. She argues that as the women advance in age, communal ties are more firmly established and the threat of social ostracization decreases. Therefore, there is more of a possibility that Orthodox women who openly identify as feminists will be of middle age.

Leah talked about the fear of rejection that she says stopped her from being more outspoken on feminist issues in her youth. "I didn't want people to look at me and think that I wasn't really religious," but, she then adds, "When I got to the age of 40, I really stopped caring what people thought about my observance."

Rinat, who is now in her 50s and very active in Orthodox feminism, expressed her reasons for not identifying as a feminist earlier in her life. She reflected on how she felt about gender discrimination in her early twenties:

Okay, so there is a little injustice there, but as an upright member of the tribe, [and] to marry right, I wasn't going to be rocking the boat so much and I was going to observe all the rules of the tribe.

After she was married with children, Sara felt differently:

I couldn't live in the compartmentalized world [that I lived in] when I was 22 and just wanted to be a member of the tribe or whatever you want to call it.

This theme was also present in Gali's description of the experience of her own daughter who is now in her twenties and looking to settle down: "[my daughter] agrees with a lot of what I do, [but] she has other things to worry about now besides feminist issues."

Reut offers a perspective summarizing the hesitations she thinks that young women go through regarding feminism, and the transformation that may occur in them later in life:

Feminist awareness and desire for equality is something that develops with age. That is, many of the young women are afraid of what people would

say about them if they were to identify with what is perceived as feminist radicalism. It is hard for them to come to terms with a complex identity as youngsters. Now, the more they mature and are exposed to life and see the pain and sometimes even real tragedies of reality, they become in a natural way more and more feminist.

In the above statement, Reut makes a connection between a “coming of age” and the feeling of despair over tragedies that women face in religious life. It is important to note that a number of women in this study made this sort of connection, pointing yet again to how intertwined the issues that the women see as central to the formation of their feminist identity are.

Feminist Identity and the Family

In light of some of the above narratives, it is apparent that a reoccurring theme among the interviewees was that a consideration whether to identify as feminists in their youth was in part a strategic one to avoid alienation. That is, their experience taught them that for young Orthodox women to identify with feminism leaves them in an isolating predicament. As young women, they were concerned with finding a partner and creating a family. Identifying as a feminist and thereby identifying with the so-branded “enemy” of Orthodoxy would jeopardize such prospects.

Interestingly, however, very few interviewees talked about a personal price that they are paying within their family or in friendships. That is, while their activism has received much criticism among religious leadership and, as discussed in chapter 4, they have paid a price within their community, within their more intimate family relations feelings of alienation did not emerge as a central theme. In light of the claim made regarding age and feminist identification, this may have to do with the fact that these women became more involved in feminism at a stage when they felt secure in their personal lives. While I did not ask the interviewees about how feminism has affected their family life specifically, none of the interviewees raised this as a central issue they had to deal with.

Yet, some interviewees did suggest that in order to be an Orthodox feminist, one must have a lot of strength and support from one’s inner circle. Dorit made this point through an example.

I met a woman who came up to me after I said *Kadish* [mourners prayer] aloud in the synagogue. Now, at first I didn’t know what she would say. She had a head covering that left not even one hair uncovered and a skirt to her shoes. She looked very haredi. She came to me and said ‘Thank you for

saying Kadish. I've always wanted to but I was scared.' What was she scared of? She was probably a little scared of what her husband would say, her children, her friends. So, you need guts to do something that is different from what is acceptable. . . . Without some sort of support from your husband, it can be really hard. I don't even know if it is possible to do it and keep *shalom bayit* [domestic harmony]."

Indeed, it could very well be the case that the possibility of such tensions may be part of the reason other women also in middle age years who desire changes in women's status in Orthodoxy do not come out in support of what can be considered Orthodox feminist causes.

In respect to the point that Dorit makes regarding the need for support from one's spouse to be a feminist, I recall a television interview that Hana Kehat, founder of Kolech, and her husband gave in a program called "Against All Odds" (channel 2) which aired on December 22, 2005. The interviewer asked Kehat's husband what he wishes for his wife in the future. He responded, "That she continue to influence society as she has up till now, especially in the area of education."

While Kehat has the support of her family, she has definitely paid a heavy personal price for her activism. In addition to the constant criticism from within Orthodox society and the stigma attached to her name, after years of service she was fired from her teaching position for maintaining feminist views. As a result she went through a long court case in order to prove the discrimination. This was a battle that she won in the end (I discuss this matter in more detail at the end of chapter 2). The narratives of the women in chapter 3 also point to the tension and pain that goes with leading feminist battles within their communities.

When the focus is however on the effect of the women's feminism within their family, they discussed such considerations primarily as a problem that the young generation of Orthodox feminists would have to face. As Gali and Sara hint above, the pressures of conforming to religious life and finding a mate is so great that feminism can interfere with these prospects. Over time, however, one can assume that when relationships are solidified and couples grow together, there is more room for negotiating.

By and large, women who have taken part in Orthodox feminist organizations are able to mitigate feelings of isolation that may arise through community ties and networks of Orthodox women advancing similar goals. Yet, because young women tend not to be very motivated to be part of the Orthodox feminist movement, they are also isolated from the network of feminism. It can be noted that Kolech is aware of the generational problem in Orthodox feminist activism. Although in my

study I find reason to believe that the younger generation who are now less interested in feminist causes may come around in the future, the lack of identification with feminism among the youth has worried feminist leaders. Accordingly, at its annual conference in 2007, a separate session was arranged for young Orthodox women that sought to engage them in Orthodox feminism early on. The session was called, “What does Orthodox feminism have to do with me?”

To put things into perspective, the lack of feminist identification among youth is a general problem that feminist movements are facing. According to one study, only 29% of college students identify as feminists, though the majority seem to favor causes associated with the feminist movement (Burn, Aboud, and Moyles 2000).

So is “Orthodox-Feminist” an Oxymoron?

The central goal of this chapter has been to draw attention to a culturally unique feminism which is directly tied to the Orthodox experience and is based on the women’s reservations regarding Orthodox gender norms and practices. In this vein, it is important to emphasize that issues often portrayed as part of a feminist agenda—i.e. women’s wages, reproductive rights, representation in politics, etc.—were not reflected upon by the interviewees for this study. To associate feminism with the latter issues would be to reduce feminist identity to a very limited feminist agenda, one that is tied primarily to the struggle of the second-wave feminist movement of the United States in the 1960s.

Of course, this does not mean that some of these issues are not important to Orthodox feminists, or that Orthodox feminism is not influenced by second wave feminism, but rather that their identity as feminists should not be measured by that agenda. On this note, I suggest that viewing feminism through such a prism can in fact be seen as de-legitimizing the battles that women in different cultural frameworks are leading vis-à-vis patriarchy.

With this insight, I argue that the notion that Orthodox-feminist is an oxymoron is itself problematic. While there are indeed many points of tension between Orthodoxy and feminism (Fishman 1993, 2007; Greenberg 1981; Hartman 2002, 2007; Ross 2004; Safrai 2007), the question of feminist identity—or more precisely the feminist label—should not be confused with these points of conflict.

All forms of feminism involve a challenge of some sort to patriarchal systems. Hence, a perspective that sees a feminist-Orthodox identity as contradictory presupposes a very limited scope of what it means to be a feminist and thereby fails to capture the diverse experiences behind the feminist label.