

Coming Home to Jewish Orthodoxy: Reactionary or Radical Women?

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In recent years increasing numbers of baalei teshuva (previously uncommitted Jews who in their adult lives make a commitment to Orthodox Judaism) can be found from coast to coast. Although the measure and meaning of this renewed interest in orthodoxy is debatable, the fact that so many young, relatively affluent, well-educated and assimilated Jews have embraced orthodoxy poses intriguing questions. Perhaps most provoking is the return of women to orthodoxy, the most traditional arm of Judaism. Orthodox Judaism, after all, yields ample evidence of women's second-class status—from divorce and desertion laws to the exclusion of women from secular and religious leadership within Jewish communal and religious agencies. More strikingly, the inviolable basis of authority for Orthodox Jews is halachah, the code of law which requires that women adhere to a legal system created, defined, and refined exclusively by males. Moreover, since women customarily are prohibited from studying the very texts from which the halachic interpretations derive, they have little opportunity to challenge those laws in a manner that will be perceived as authentic or legitimate.

Conversations I have had over the past few years with more than one hundred and fifty baalot teshuva (women who choose to be Orthodox) across the country, as part of a larger project about women, feminism, and the religious right in America, reveal how similar these women are to the white, middle-class, educated women who have generally populated the feminist movement. In fact, one-fifth of these baalot teshuva had identified with the women's movement and women's rights before they became Orthodox. At first glance, their defection seems to represent a symbolic victory of the religious and political right over feminism.

However, I found that women embrace orthodoxy for a variety of reasons, very much like the multitude

of ways in which feminists might analyze their commitment to feminism. To explore the baalot teshuva's world is to uncover the ambiguities, tensions, and conflicts inherent in everyday experiences of human life where thought, behavior, and political direction often express contradictory impulses and reactions. In this spirit of paradox, I shall conclude before I begin by suggesting that to make sense of these women's motivations, choices, and "born-again" attitudes we should suspend immediate judgment and labeling. As the first stage of understanding, we should engage in what sociologists refer to as *verstehen*—giving up, in this case, preconceptions about "Orthodox revival" in order to understand it from the perspective of the "returnee," not the observer.

The odysseys of these baalot teshuva often began within a context of social protest. One-half of the women under study identify themselves as countercultural in their youth. Like many others of their generation, they describe themselves as starting out by rejecting the brash consumerism, the bureaucratic utilitarianism, and the hedonistic individualism of their parents' society. Yet, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, these women abandoned their countercultural practices and journeyed "home" to Orthodox Judaism. Although Jews by birth and upbringing, they describe a return to a religious orthodoxy that they had never known, yet one which they experienced as somehow comfortably familiar. Why had these women made so radical a change from the liberal iconoclasm of the counterculture to the most traditional values of orthodoxy? From the radical politics of the New Left to the reactionary worldview of the New Right?

As is so often the case where apparent polar oppositions reveal hidden affinities, the "coming home" of these baalot teshuva may not be so dramatic a departure from their countercultural roots or from a feminist tradition as it seems at first. Many hoped when they began their quests in the human potential movements of the sixties and seventies to use self-awareness as a way to grow individually and in their personal relationships. For many of these women, however, the search for authentic selfhood led merely to a deepening discon-

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nection from others and a recognition of the diminished sense of personal meaning and responsibility. In one important sense their "coming home" to orthodoxy might be viewed as a new and curious turn on the convoluted road to meaning, integrity, and value. If the fork on the left had failed to yield meaning, the turn to the right might still lead to the promised end.

Irrespective of their political roots and former lifestyles, all these women consciously reject secular culture. In telling their stories, they report a common experience: Their lives had been spiritually meaningless. But more than a mere disenchantment with modern secular society prompted their homeward journeys. For most, emptiness of modern living became a euphemism for specific complaints, most commonly expressed as the culture's confusion and ambivalence toward women, women's sexuality, and family and gender roles. Their return to orthodoxy, in some fundamental way, constitutes a protest against secular society, which most characterize as masculine in orientation and organization.

All women expressed concern about the loss of clear rules and expectations in marital, familial, and sexual relationships in secular culture. In discussing their relationships prior to their return, they especially emphasized their relationships with men who were unwilling or unable to make lasting commitments. As one woman expressed it:

There I was, twenty-five years of age. I had had my fill of casual sexual relationships, drugs, communal living. I looked at myself and said: What will I be like at forty years of age? An aging hippie with no roots and maybe just a history of bad relationships? I wanted something true and lasting.

For many of these women the statistics of twentieth-century living and the "dark side" of individualism had become a real, not theoretical, problem in the reconstruction of personal life.

Ironically, it is through their return to a patriarchal tradition in Jewish orthodoxy that many of these women claim they are in touch with their own bodies and the "feminine virtues" of nurturance, mutuality, family, and motherhood. For example, their perceptions of *tabarat hamisepacha* (the family purity laws which prohibit sexual contact between wife and husband during the days of menstruation and seven days thereafter and require a ritual bath before sexual contact is resumed) are particularly instructive. Although many feminists have stressed the insidious political implications of menstrual impurity beliefs, these women view the family purity laws quite differently.

Almost all women I spoke with described the family purity laws as positive. Many felt that these laws in-

creased their sexual satisfaction within marriage. Even among the newly married, many claimed that forced separation heightened desire. Others referred to the "autonomy" and "control" they experienced when practicing the rituals of sexual separation. Invoking Virginia Woolf's phrase, one woman noted, "It allows me a bed of my own." Other women emphasized the increased time for themselves, and still others spoke of a kind of control over their sexuality. Because women have to attend intimately to their bodies to engage in sexual activity according to religious law, many baalot teshuva speak of an increased awareness and harmony with their bodies they had never known before.

Women, in their roles as mothers and wives, are central in maintaining those rituals which separate Orthodox Jews from other Jews and from the larger gentile world. From this perspective women are central to Orthodox living.

While I do not intend to imply that all of these women are sexually satisfied, in control of their sexuality, or personally happy with marriage and/or sexuality, they clearly believe that the family purity laws function positively for them within marriage. Frequently women would state, "My husband cannot take me for granted," or, as one woman put it, "My husband's sexual desire is not the only consideration." However, the experiences that grow from their practices are more than responses to limiting or controlling males. While these women believe that the purity laws encourage men to respect them as sexual beings and while this, in turn, increases their own self-respect (particularly toward their bodies), there seems to be even more at stake in such ritual practices. From the imagery of their language and the descriptions of their experiences, a symbolic framework for social existence emerges which transcends the self and the couple and embraces, ultimately, the entire community.

These women clearly feel connected to something larger than the community that defines itself as male. "I feel connected to history and to other women," says one woman. Feeling a sense of history, another woman mused: "The Jews at Masada used the mikvah [ritual bath]. Each time I use the mikvah I feel I come back to the center of Judaism and to my own core." What

became clear after talking with so many women was that for them the core of Judaism emanates from activities and obligations shared with *other* women even, and perhaps most ironically, when speaking of the religious rituals surrounding their heterosexuality.

Caught in the dilemma of twentieth-century individualism, these women seem to reconstruct their personal lives by moving beyond the self to the community and to what they believe to be timeless truths. Sexuality within orthodoxy is not merely a biological need or a means of self-expression but, rather, a holy ritual.

The very terms these women use to describe their orthodoxy meet requirements which have been identified by some feminists as necessary for a feminist theology. They focus on women's dignity and deep spirituality as they describe their experiences with religious symbols, tradition, and beliefs.

While these women do not directly challenge male authority in the Orthodox community (thereby limiting whatever effect they can have on the community as a whole), they claim very powerful sacred images of themselves and their functions. The family, "their" domain, is described as "the sanctuary on earth." They often refer to the Shabbat (Sabbath) as "feminine" or as "a taste of the world to come." Among many of the women there is an implicit belief that they "will prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah;" still others refer to the "indwelling" of God as female. These powerful images embody a sense of the sacred community of which they are a principal part as "feminine," in direct contrast to the male, secular culture which they reject.

Their return to orthodoxy contains no world-escaping visions, no models for alternative realities, but rather a tradition with a moral ordering in which women play a fundamental role. For them the Orthodox religious and social community is more than synagogue and study. Women, they claim, in their roles as mothers and wives, are central in maintaining those rituals which separate Orthodox Jews from other Jews and from the larger gentile world. From this perspective women are central to Orthodox living.

These women use the feminine and the family to relate to the world in a spiritual and moral way which they claim is personally satisfying. They find purpose and meaning in their female activities and positive self-definition in feminine attributes. The familial and the feminine provide a counterbalance for them to a world "run amok" with masculine notions of success, achievement, and status acted out through competitive individualism and self-aggrandizement. In this sense many have come almost full circle back to their counter-cultural roots. They view themselves not merely as passive reflections of male imagery but, rather, as moral agents for positive action.

The baalot teshuva not only believe in gender difference—they celebrate it. Yet there are some twists on their ideological commitments. Although these women take a clear pro-family stance, their emphasis on family and motherhood does not negate working or help with childcare. Of the little more than half of the women with whom I spoke who were not working, almost all intend to join the paid labor force at some time. Nearly all those without advanced degrees intend to retrain and/or obtain more education before returning to the labor force. Most mothers use some form of childcare or day care services regularly, whether they work or not. Of those working full-time, half have someone living in the household to help with childcare responsibilities, and all mothers share childcare responsibilities with their husbands, at least to some extent. Because of their religious commitment to prayer (three times a day) and study, many men create flexibility in their work patterns. Their presence in the home, often during the day, provides them with frequent contact and often more responsibility for children than fathers gone all day.

Is the "feminine orthodoxy" of the baalot teshuva just another version of the "feminine mystique"? In a society where the number of divorcees is slowly coming to equal the number of marriages, where one in three women can expect to be sexually assaulted by a man during her lifetime, where women can expect to earn little more than half of what men do, despite their talent, experience, and education, it is not surprising that women still see themselves as economically and socially oppressed despite their steady gains in the public world of education and work. For the majority of women, steady and increasing entry into the labor market, even in the most educated and highly trained sector, has not offset economic vulnerability. National quality of life studies indicate that both working and nonworking wives and mothers maintain the major responsibility for domestic and childcare activities. If "destructive dependence" had been the code word for the feminine mystique, "false independence" may characterize the feminist one.

The baalot teshuva defend their choice of life-style within a contemporary familial context. They regard orthodoxy—from the family purity laws to the value and dignity accorded them as wives and mothers—as institutional protection. In this very specific sense they are not dependent upon individual males but upon a theology they believe "feminine" in values and principles. Although the depth of religious commitment among these baalot teshuva should not be minimized, the phenomenon of becoming Orthodox may also be an expression of a quest for revalued domesticity, an emphasis on their everyday lives as wives and mothers.

By reviving a focus on these roles, roles which every national survey suggests most young women intend to play, these women refocus on an area of women's lives they claim contemporary feminism—which they associate with the liberal feminism of Betty Friedan and NOW—disregards and devalues.

Yet many of the issues raised by these baalot teshuva do come from a feminist tradition. For instance, at the turn of the century a vital and lively feminist tradition existed whose members advocated the transformation of the home. These feminists were concerned with the place of women within both the family and society at large. They advocated reform from the perspectives, experiences, and concerns of women, celebrating gender differences and the feminine.

Historian Estelle Freedman (1979) argues that there is a "dialectic of tradition" in the experiences of many nineteenth-century feminists who, as oppressed women, wished to affirm the value of their own culture while rejecting the past oppression from which that culture in part originated. Domestic, social, and cultural feminists of the nineteenth century all shared a common approach: the reclaiming of the autonomous values attached to women's "community."

Feminist historians and anthropologists have emphasized how female institution building and sex-segregated living at times have enabled women to resist male domination or to gain control over those spheres of life that are defined as women's. Some historians claim that it is antagonism with men and male culture that prompts women to seek and defend separatist living, showing ways in which sex-segregated living may create structural opportunities for a certain degree of psychic autonomy from men and perhaps for the formation of group consciousness among women.

The contemporary liberal feminism to which these baalot teshuva allude, rooted in an ideology of individualism, does not address many issues some early feminists and many of the baalot teshuva raise. Feminist campaigns in the public realm of work and education have perhaps inadvertently exaggerated the importance of the public sphere of life. Liberal feminism does not necessarily engage in a critique of materialistic market society, nor does it challenge the morality of utilitarian ethics. It leaves individuals to deal with the problems of personal life as if those problems were separated from the larger public context in which they occur.

These baalot teshuva, like many feminists of last century, juxtapose idealized images of the family/the feminine with the economy/the masculine. They use the sacred and the feminine to hold impious men to pious rules. Visions of homelike communities based on

concepts of mutual aid and service to others strike a contrast with the competitive economic model of individual rewards. The union of shared action and a collective sense of self which comes from their sex-segregated living constitutes the moral community most were searching for in the earlier stages of their lives. Many women claim they have succeeded in overriding the narcissistic elements of our times in the reconstruction of their personal lives.

Yet while there is a feminist ancestry to many of these baalot teshuva's claims to feminine values, they are not feminists. Their concerns are limited to Orthodox, heterosexual, Jewish women. Unmarried, divorced, widowed, separated, and childless women face clear problems within such communities. While the baalot teshuva may reclaim or retrieve values attached to the women's community, those values are limited almost exclusively to the roles of motherhood and wifehood. At best, this is a short-term tactic which allows them some amount of woman-centered identity and, perhaps, some psychic autonomy from men. However, it is still within a patriarchal context. Therefore, while they may claim positive values associated with the feminine, they do so without the mechanisms or legitimacy to reject what is still oppressive. In the long run this is not a feminist vision.

However, women attracted to the religious right do have something to say to contemporary feminists. The baalot teshuva, similar perhaps to other right-wing women, vocalize profound popular concerns. Feminism must provide not only a broad social and political vision but also a responsiveness to daily concerns. The voices of these women, be they a moral majority or a moral minority, cannot be placed in isolation from ongoing or historic feminist debates about sex/gender and the family. While our political and individual motivations may vary, it seems useful for contemporary feminists to engage in a "dialectic of tradition," just as it has been useful for feminists in the past. For without that "dialectic" we may lose the intellectual and political legitimacy of our trenchant criticisms of the organization of familial life. We may lose our credibility in guiding decisions about childcare and our children's needs. We may lose our rights over our bodies and our sexuality. Without a claim to the feminine in our feminist past we may be falsely characterized as hostile to children, to the family, or simply as man-hating. While I do not believe we must embrace patriarchy in order to defeat it, I do believe we must engage in a "dialectic of tradition" with our feminist past, a clear part of patriarchy itself, if we are to have a feminist future. □