ACTIVE VOICES

Women in Jewish Culture

Edited by

MAURIE SACKS

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS
Urbana and Chicago
1995

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Experiencing Hasidism: Newly Orthodox Women's Perspectives on Sexuality and Domesticity

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The data in this chapter reflect some of the ways in which Hasidic women who have voluntarily entered the world of Jewish Orthodoxy simultaneously accommodate and recast ritual,[1] particularly in the areas of sexuality and family. In Hebrew, women who have "returned"[2] to Orthodoxy are called *ba'alot teshuvah*. Of the 150 women I interviewed[3] across five major urban areas in the United States in the mid-1980s, 85 women[4] identified themselves as either from the Lubavitcher or Bostoner Hasidim.[5] Unlike most other Hasidic sects, these two groups believe in and have active outreach programs.

Contemporary Hasidism is based on a Jewish pietistic movement founded in eighteenth-century Poland by Israel ben Eliezer (known by Hasidim as the *Besht*, or the Master of the Good Name). Hasidism broke with the elitist tradition of scholarship common to Orthodox rabbinical academies of that time by making Judaism more accessible to poor Jews. It stressed prayer, joy, and religious devotion in all aspects of daily life, and disseminated variations on kabbalistic and mystical thought, particularly regarding the coming of the Messiah.[6] Many of the Hasidic women I studied believe that the Hasidic tradition stresses functions that honor feminine imagery and female roles and that it is through their everyday activities as Orthodox wives and mothers that the Messiah will come.[7]

Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of Hasidim, however, is their attachment and obedience to a single authority, the man known as their rebbe, who represents their specific sect's rabbinic dynasty. Bonnie Morris argues that Hasidic women differ from other Orthodox women in that they, like men, have as their central authority only one person, the rebbe. For Morris, the control of one man over his followers has opened, rather than limited, the opportunities for Hasidic women.

In the eighteenth century, writes Morris, women played an important role in disseminating Hasidic teachings. Moreover, the often literate wives and daughters of rabbis frequently served as role models for other women. Morris notes that some women were even "designated as prophetesses, received male seekers, wrote manuscripts or led discourses on the nature of the Hasidic path."[8] Despite the obvious criticism that such women represent the exceptions rather than the rule in Hasidic communities, female activism, expressed through proselytizing and maintaining the household as breadwinners for scholarly husbands, was, and often still is, quite common. Today, as in the past, especially among the Bostoner and Lubavitcher sects, women are active participants in the outreach campaigns of their respective communities. However, Hasidic women, like their other Orthodox sisters, depend on men for spiritual leadership and theological scholarship in the public corporate community that calls itself Orthodox.

Some Background

In the larger study of which these women were a part, 71 percent identified with the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s (70). A little over 92 percent (65) of those women were Hasidic.[9] Implicit in the complaints of countercultural youth, and among the *ba'alot teshuvah* as well, was a discontent with the pluralistic relativisim of modern living. Steven Tipton believes that this kind of relativism forces us to migrate through discrepant worlds, so that "the cognitive and normative definitions of modern culture become abstracted and emptied of specific content in order to be flexible." In this way, he argues, no activity has any intrinsic value and each person is set at the center of his/her own "universe of calculated consequences."[10] For all the women in this study, the return to Orthodox Ju-

daism constitutes a conscious rejection of secular culture and the relativism of modern living to which Tipton alludes. Most *ba'alot teshuvah* describe themselves as searching for moral guidelines, absolute truths, and above all a sense of community to counter the individualistic bent of modern culture.

Although there had been neo-Orthodox revivals before the counterculture, the "hippies'" attraction to such movements recast and popularized them. The *ba'al teshuvah* (contemporary Orthodox revival) movement in America originated in this period of "hippie" religious sentiment. Writing about the history of the contemporary revival of Orthodox Judaism, Danzger notes that the late sixties and early seventies brought a new population of believers to Jewish Orthodoxy.[11] Danzger believes that "hippies" were initially attracted to Jewish Orthodoxy because they found an affinity between their countercultural interests and their distorted understanding of Hasidism; there was its mystical philosophy, its gurulike rebbe,[12] its emotional expression of religiosity and its communal-like organization. Danzger also notes that, paralleling Eastern religions, Hasidism placed a "far heavier emphasis on ritual than was found in established American religions."[13] Reform and Conservative Judaism, the more progressive branches of Judaism, were identified with mainstream American values. Therefore, the more assimilated wings of Judaism were not suited for those youth who wanted a spontaneous and ecstatic religious experience.[14]

As they told their stories of return, women reported a common experience: their lives had been spiritually empty and without purpose before their return. The meaninglessness of modern living became a euphemism for specific issues, most commonly expressed in their perception of a cultural ambivalence and confusion toward women, toward women's sexuality, and toward family and gender roles. In contrast, Jewish Orthodoxy places family and the home above the individual. It has strict codes of behavior for both men and women. The religious world substitutes for aggression, pride, self-indulgence and an individualistic orientation (often equated in the secular world with masculinity), humility, self-restraint, and a collective orientation.

Before their "return" to Orthodoxy, the *ba'alot teshuvah* claim that they could find no "valid," "legitimate," or "moral" precepts upon which they could conduct their interpersonal relations. The

norms guiding their personal lives, especially around issues of sexuality, were common features in their stories of return. For most of these women, sexuality as a means of gaining intimacy and closeness with others had become depersonalized. And indeed the late sixties and early seventies saw rapid social change in both technology and ideology surrounding sexuality, reproduction, and family. These women described familial life as no longer a place of retreat, with defined rules of behavior, but rather as yet another domain where individuals may or may not be successful in working through the order and meaning of their lives. The return to Jewish Orthodoxy among these women was as much a return to a revalued domesticity and personal life as to religion.

From Discontent to Orthodoxy

In my research, I found that despite some demographic differences, content analyses of the interview material reveal certain persistent themes. For example, almost all the women interviewed expressed some concern about the loss of boundaries in marital, familial, and sexual relations prior to their return to Jewish Orthodoxy. They spoke freely about their poor heterosexual relationships and especially of their relationships to men unwilling to make lasting commitments. To make their points when discussing the "decline" of the family, they often referred to the high divorce rate and seemingly high rate of adultery.

Almost to a woman, the *ba'alot teshuvah* in this study believe in clear and persistent differences between the sexes. Like Schely-Newman's storyteller and Sered's elderly Mideastern women (in this volume), these *ba'alot teshuvah* affirm gender differentiation and celebrate traditional feminine qualities, particularly those associated with mothering. They assert an unambiguous "profamily" stance. Deeper probing revealed other strengths associated with family and marriage, particularly among the Hasidic women. Using the kabbalistic meaning for "indwelling or presence of God," many of the Hasidic women used the word "Shekhina" to refer to the feminine in *Hasidut* (Hasidic philosophy). "Marriage," notes one woman, "is the union of God and the *Shekhina.*" Unlike some classical Christian sources that demean marriage and sexuality (for instance, marriage as a concession to the frailty of the flesh), the Hasidic women

celebrate the "sacred," if not mysterious, quality of marriage and indeed of their own physicality.

In particular, the Hasidic women were very sure of their place in the family. While not necessarily excluding their husbands from family decision making, the women expressed strong feelings of control. "What I say is law," emphasized one woman. She continues: "I don't mean that my husband has nothing to say about how we spend money or raise the children, but he defers to me on most of these issues." Another woman spoke of her strong motivation to be sure that her daughters have a good secular education. "My husband agrees with me," she notes, "when I say that Dvorah [her daughter] should be afforded every opportunity to go to medical school. She is very good in science, like I was. This, of course, after she has had a good religious education. You know, there are Orthodox women doctors. There is nothing in Orthodoxy that prevents women from receiving advanced training or education."

The specialness of woman and the importance of her sphere of activity was stressed throughout the interviews and often was juxtaposed against a rather rigid concept of what was described as feminism. Feminism, for the majority of the Hasidic women in this study, is defined as the women's liberation movement focused on dismissing differences between men and women and on the world of work, where equal pay is the most important issue. In general, women felt they had gained through their Orthodoxy, and especially through their roles in the family, a new dignity, a dignity they felt most contemporary feminists disregarded and devalued. Ironically, however, they often used feminist rhetoric and emphasis when describing their current lives. This is especially evident in their discussion of the family purity laws. These laws demand a two-week sexual separation between husband and wife during the wife's menstrual cycle. To end the period of *niddah* (sexual separation), the *ba'alot teshuvah,* like other observant Orthodox women, immerse themselves in a *mikvah*[15] on the seventh day after they have completed menstruating.

Almost all women in the study noted the positive functions of the family purity laws. At the top of the list were claims of increased sexual satisfaction within the marriage. Although newly married women were more likely to complain about sexual separation, those married over longer periods of time and with more children found

the laws quite positive over the adult life cycle. One Hasidic woman notes, "When we were first married I found it hard to consider sexual separation as a positive thing. In fact, during my menstrual cycle I felt I wanted to be held and loved more than at other times of the month. But I must admit over the years it truly serves as a renewal. . . . it is really like being a bride again . . . well almost."

Even among the newly married, many claimed that forced separation heightened desire. Hasidic women, more than others in the study, were the most likely to fully discuss their experiences with the family purity laws. They often referred to the autonomy and control they experienced when practicing such laws. Almost parodying Virginia Wolfe, one woman notes, "It allows me a bed of my own." Others referred to the increased time for themselves. "I can curl up with a good book during *niddah* and not feel in the least bit guilty." Others spoke of a sense of control. "I can say no with no pretence [*sic*] of a headache if I wish." The women almost unanimously characterized the laws as positive for their marriages.

Specific data on the frequency of sexual intercourse and sexual satisfaction and experimentation were not forthcoming. Modesty rules inhibit truly open discourse about such details. However, perhaps because they are *ba'alot teshuvah* and not *frum* (Orthodox) from birth, as they often refer to other Orthodox women, *ba'alot teshuvah* may be more forthcoming than other Orthodox women about their sexual lives. While it is neither clear nor very probable that all of these women are sexually satisfied, in control of their sexuality, or personally happy with marriage and/or sexuality, it is quite clear that they believe that the laws of *niddah* function positively for them.

The experiences that grow from these practices reflect more than feelings of control. The symbolic framework emerging from their language, imagery, and experiences moves beyond the self and the dyad to the community at large. For instance, no woman doubted the importance of the *mikvah* to the community. As one Hasidic woman states, "There is no doubt about it. . . . if a choice has to be made a community has to build a mikvah before it can build a *shul* (synagogue) or even acquire a *Sefer Torah* (Five Books of Moses)."

However, it is to yet another community that these women feel connected. "I feel connected to history and to other women," says

one woman who has practiced the family purity laws since her marriage twelve years ago. Feeling a sense of history one woman muses, "The Jews at Masada used the mikvah." "Each time I use the *mikvah* I feel I come back to the center of Judaism and to my own core," a Hasidic woman married fifteen years proclaims. What became clear after several years of interviewing was that for these women the core of Judaism emanates from activities and obligations shared with other women—even, and perhaps most particularly, when speaking of the religious ritual surrounding their sexuality.

Rather than viewing their sexuality as merely physical/personal and/or individual, many of these *ba'alot teshuvah* place their physicality and sexuality in a timeless, spiritual context. Regarding the two-week sexual separation during menstruation, one Hasidic woman notes that "one half of the time I belong to my husband the other half to God." These women view their sexuality in what Penelope Washbourn would define as a "graceful" rather than "demonic" experience.[16] Their physiology is integrated into a wider social and symbolic framework, not reduced merely to its biological aspects. They place the family purity practices in the context of purification rites for the temple (when sexual sanctions applied to all members of the community) and hold to that "graceful" context in all of their interpretations.

One particularly articulate *ba'alat teshuvah,* who had come so far in her own studies that she taught seminars for other Hasidic women on the family purity laws, notes that "during niddah, the woman falls between categories of life and death." Calling on nonlegal but traditional sources of explanation, she argues, "When it is asked why women and not men are still subject to purity rituals I look to traditional explanations—you can find one that suggests women are closer to God because of their ability to create life. . . . still another views the woman's body as a sacred temple. I like to think of a woman's cycle as part of all the sacred time rhythms in Judaism—the Shabbat, holidays."

According to these Hasidic *ba'alot teshuvah,* a woman's cultural status in Orthodox Judaism is not devalued symbolically, explicitly, or socioculturally. These women affirm that the family purity laws are a unique engendering force, a sensuous, transformative power, symbolic not only of life but also of life's continuity.

Conclusions

The worldview expressed by many of the Hasidic *ba'alot teshuvah* in this study embraces a code in which the purpose of life is more than domination and acquisition; rather, it is the elevation of things to a sacred quality here on earth. As one woman phrased it, "A dwelling place for God below." In particular, the Hasidic women claim that they play an active role in the creation of the sacred on earth, in the transformation of the physical into the spiritual.[17] This argument does not differ from many of those made by some radical feminists who describe the reclaiming of Christianity on feminine and female terms.[18]

The concerns that these *ba'alot teshuvah* have about an impersonal world devoid of an emphasis on female, feminine, and family brings them, in some sense, almost full circle back to the countercultural roots and protest from which many of them started. By their own admission, their searches were often prompted by a sense of meaninglessness in their interpersonal relations. Caught in the dilemma of twentieth-century individualism, where personalism is reduced not only to the private arena of life but to a context where each person is set at the center of his/her own "universe of calculated consequences,"[19] these women reconstruct their personal lives by reconnecting, through the practices of Orthodox Judaism, the self, body, and family to the public Orthodox community of timeless truths.

According to formal traditional Jewish law, women are forbidden to participate in either the creation or the interpretation of those laws that govern their lives; nor can they represent the public corporate community that calls itself Hasidic in prayer or study. Yet despite this dictate, the data suggest that newly Orthodox Hasidic women experience Hasidism in ways far less restrictive than formal patriarchal law prescribes. Indeed, the values, modes of communication, personalism, and language of nurturance that emerge in these women's interviews need not be explained as based on women's unique sensibilities or differences (as most of them would claim) but rather as a product of the shared actions and meanings they derive from the activities and relationships involved in their many homosocial activities.

These Hasidic women represent an energetic community, strong

in a commitment and belief that the female, and those symbols and activities identified with her, are vital and highly valued in the community at large. These women are not incorrect in their assessments that they represent the guardians of the tradition. Moreover, in their everyday lives as mothers and wives they maintain the vital distinctions between the profane and the sacred for the community as a whole (from maintaining the many dietary laws to purification in the *mikvah*).

Like women cited in Michelle Rosaldo's overview of women in anthropological studies,[20] the *ba'alot teshuvah* seem to use the very symbols and social customs that set them apart to establish female solidarity and worth and to refashion male-made symbols. The extra-domestic ties these women share with one another seem to be important sources of power and self-esteem. In such a highly sex-segregated world, these Hasidic women appear free to develop their own systems of meaning. In so doing they also make it possible to make claims upon the community, not only as individuals, but as a community of women. Separatist living may serve as a way for these women to have some control over what they define as theirs in the Hasidic community. While I do not wish to conflate all women's experiences into one simple and unvaried theme, if we open our investigations of Hasidic women beyond the activities and perspectives of men, we can glimpse yet another view of the Hasidic social order.

However, we cannot neglect the context in which these women negotiate their religious and gender identities. While Hasidism may provide these women with a woman-centered identity and communal recognition of the importance of female-linked practices and symbols, if gender identity is negotiated within the boundaries of patriarchal, social, and religious authority, it runs the risk of reinforcing essentialist formulations about women as patriarchally defined. It simultaneously reinforces patriarchal politics by further empowering those already empowered to define and refine Orthodoxy.[21]

In all likelihood, time will alter many of these women's experiences with Hasidism, especially those experiences that tie their private and religious lives so closely. If the expression of their spirituality is so closely connected to the lives they lead as wives and mothers, what might happen when those roles are completed or substantially diminished as they move along the life cycle from young

wives to widows? Their choices have been made at a particular point in time and at a particular time in the life cycle. While their female collective consciousness may now mesh well with the overall definitions of themselves within the sex-segregated world of Orthodoxy, what will happen when a disjuncture arises between what is culturally given and what is subjectively experienced? The close connections the *ba'alot teshuvah* make between their domestic and religious lives may continue to affect the way they collectively interpret the symbols and rituals of the Orthodox community. (See Sered in this volume for observations about elderly Orthodox women.)

As women live longer and spend more time without children and without husbands, as most demographic projections suggest,[22] will the issues concerning their spirituality in the public religious community, as opposed to the private sphere of home, become more important to them? Will the virulent attacks against the women, including Orthodox women, who attempted to pray at the Western Wall in Israel (without violating Jewish law),[23] for instance, become problematic for women when they find more time for public rituals and spirituality? Will the aggressive stance taken against the Palestinians and the vigorous defense of Israeli settlements in the West Bank lead any of these women to question their belief that a "feminine ethos," as they collectively define it, is at the heart of Orthodoxy? The answers to these and other questions await longitudinal research.

In this chapter I have touched briefly on some of the ways in which Hasidic women experience Jewish Orthodoxy. Paralleling current theoretical thinking among social scientists interested in "new ethnography" and postmodernism,[24] I have stayed close to the "text" the Hasidic women in my study have provided. Rather than presenting them as passive representatives of a fixed and oppressive past, I have tried to capture the ways in which they expand upon meaning and symbol in response to Jewish Orthodox practice and ritual. Such agency, however, is always limited by patriarchal boundaries that are, paradoxically, often reinforced by women's activism.

NOTES

An earlier version of this chapter appeared in *Rachel's Daughters* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), © 1991 by Debra Renee Kaufman. Used by permission of Rutgers University Press.

1. Sometime in their adult lives, these women consciously chose to live a Hasidic life. Some were never Orthodox, and some are more traditional than their parents, or may have lapsed in their Orthodox beliefs and practices for some period of time. Generally, most had lived outside traditional Orthodox beliefs and practices. In addition to identifying with a Hasidic community, they had to be strictly observant of the Sabbath and all the dietary laws in order to be included in this study.

2. The term *teshuvah* can be translated from the Hebrew to mean either "return" or "repent." Orthodox Jews believe that all Jews who are not currently Orthodox are considered to be in the process of "returning" or "repenting." The term in English is a misnomer in that most of these women had never been Orthodox.

3. The interviews began with a number of predefined topics but were unstructured and in-depth, focusing on the history of women's return to Orthodoxy, their current familial and communal life-style, and their views about gender roles and feminism.

4. For the majority of Hasidic women, the range of return was between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. At the time of interviewing, most had been *ba'alot teshuvah* for an average of five years. Most came from middle-class backgrounds and currently occupy a middle-class socioeconomic status. Although they are all committed to childbearing and childrearing, close to one-third of them work outside of the home. Of those who work, the majority are in female-dominated occupations or, if in male-dominated ones, in female-dominated subspecialties. Irrespective of work status, household help and childcare of some sort is common.

5. Schneur Zalman (1745–1813) was the founder of Chabad Hasidism, which became known as Lubavitch Hasidism when its leaders moved to the Belorussian town of Lubavitch, two years after Zalman's death. Susan Handelman notes that his writings were a "unique synthesis of Rabbinical Judaism, Kabbalah, Rationalism, and applied Mysticism" ("The Crown of Her Husband: The Image of the Feminine in Chassidic Philosophy" [manuscript, Department of English, University of Maryland, College Park, 1984], p. 3). Following in his father's footsteps, the Bostoner rebbe, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak Horowitz, tailored Hasidism to the United States and located his group in Boston (although one need not live in Boston to be a follower of the Bostoner rebbe).

6. S. Sharot, *Messianism, Mysticism, and Magic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); B. Morris, "Women of Valor: Female Religious Activism and Identity in the Lubavitcher Community of Brooklyn, 1955–1987" (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York at Binghamton, 1990); and Liz Harris, *Holy Days: The World of a Hasidic Family* (New York: Summit Books, 1985).

7. Adopting and sometimes transforming ideas from the kabbalist and mystic Isaac ben Solomon Luria, the Hasidim embraced the idea that many divine sparks had fallen into the sphere of evil. Therefore, Hasidism is a monistic system where absolute evil has no independent existence. See Gershom Scholem, *Modern Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961); Sharot, *Messianism;* Handelman, "Crown of Her Husband." The key task, then, of the Hasid is to uncover or penetrate the appearance of evil in order to see and have contact with the real. This places a great emphasis on contact with and transformation of the material world. It is women's greater association with the physical and material world (and women's life-sustaining functions) that these women use to support their claims that the female and feminine imagery are central to Orthodoxy.

8. Morris, "Women of Valor," p. 11.

9. Interviews with leading rabbis, lay community leaders, and known *ba'alot teshuvah* in each of five major urban cities helped locate both the Lubavitcher and Bostoner Hasidim. Once within these settings, the referral method or snowball technique of sampling (see James Coleman, *The Adolescent Society* [Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1971]) was employed, thereby identifying smaller interactive groups of *ba'alot teshuvah* in each community. Interviewing ended when no new names were generated. No claims are made that the women under study were randomly drawn as a sample of a defined universe, nor can the interviewed be considered statistically representative of those who return to Orthodoxy or Hasidism, or of Orthodoxy itself.

10. S. Tipton, *Getting Saved from the Sixties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 24.

11. M. H. Danzger, *Returning to Tradition: The Contemporary Revival of Orthodox Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

12. What distinguishes Hasidim from other Orthodox Jews is their devotion to their rebbe. The rebbe is considered a moral instructor and spiritual leader.

13. Danzger, *Returning to Tradition,* p. 81.

14. Robert Bellah explains that at this same period of time most mainline Protestant denominations reflected the culture's dominant ethos in being virtually devoid of anything like "ecstatic experiences" (Bellah, "New Religious Consciousness and the Crisis in Modernity," in C. Glock and R. Bellah, eds., *The New Religious Consciousness* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976], p. 340).

15. The *mikvah* is a collection of a special pool of water constructed according to rigid legal specifications. Until a woman has immersed herself in the *mikvah* after menstruation, she cannot resume a physical relationship with her husband.

16. P. Washbourn, "Becoming Woman: Menstruation as a Spiritual Experience," in C. Christ and J. Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 228–45.

17. For further elaboration, see these works by Debra Kaufman: "Women Who Return to Orthodox Judaism: A Feminist Analysis," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 47 (1985): 543–55; "Feminism Reconstructed: Feminist Theories and Women Who Return to Orthodox Judaism," *Midwest Sociologists for Women in Society* 5 (1985): 45–55; "Patriarchal Women: A Case Study of Newly Orthodox Jewish Women," *Symbolic Interaction* 12 (1989): 299–314; *Rachel's Daughters* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

18. See also Christ and Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising*.

19. Tipton, *Getting Saved*, p. 24.

20. M. Rosaldo, "Women, Culture, and Society: A Theoretical Overview," in Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Women, Culture, and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 17–42. See also Rosaldo, "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-Cultural Understanding," *Signs* 5, no. 3 (1980): 389–417.

21. Moreover, by conflating the political with the cultural world of Jewish Orthodoxy, these newly Orthodox Jewish women ideologically support an authoritarian trend in U.S. politics, despite the fact that for the most part Orthodox Jewish leaders do not assert a self-conscious domestic political agenda.

22. J. Giele, *Women and the Future* (New York: Free Press, 1982); and H. Lopata, *Women as Widows: Support Systems* (New York: Elsevier, 1989).

23. See, for instance, the article by Rabbi Susan Grossman and R. Susan Aranoff, "Women under Siege at the Western Wall," *Women's League Outlook* (Spring 1990): 7–10.

24. See, for example, F. Mascia-Lees, P. Sharpe, and C. Cohen, "The Making and Unmaking of the Female Body in Postmodern Theory and Culture: A Study of Subjection and Agency" (manuscript, 1989).

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