

THE
MIDWEST
FEMINIST
PAPERS V

Midwest Sociologists for Women in Society

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Feminism Reconstructed: Feminist Theories
and Women Who Return to Orthodox Judaism

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This article is a revised version of two papers: "Gender-Role Difference: Feminist Theory, Family, Women Who Return to Orthodox Judaism" delivered to the National Council on Family Relations, San Francisco, October, 1984; and "Family, Feminism and Sex Roles: Women Returning to Orthodox Judaism" delivered to the joint session for the Association of Jewish Studies and the Association for the Sociological Study of Jewry, Boston, December, 1984. A fuller version of this article is to appear in the Journal of Marriage and the Family (forthcoming 1985).

This brief essay explores the similarities among and between some 19th and 20th century feminist thinkers, those whom I have labeled as maximalists, and women who have embraced orthodox Judaism. I wish to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of their positions on family and gender-roles and some of the consequences of such thinking for feminist theory.

In this article I shall report some of the preliminary findings on an ongoing study of baalat teshuva (women who have returned to Orthodox Judaism). Specifically, I wish to compare the gender-role attitudes among these women to some of the current and past trends in thinking about gender-role difference among feminist scholars.

A Brief Overview of Feminist Theory

Feminist scholarship has served to challenge many kinds of separations and dichotomies, particularly those dualities found in the language of sex roles and family theory. Eisenstein notes that the first wave of writers among contemporary feminists all agree on one point: that what was defined as female difference was also a primary source of women's oppression. "patriarchy was built upon the exaggeration and the maintenance of women's otherness from men" (Eisenstein, 1983, p.45).

The effect of such concerns on this first wave of feminist scholars was to spur them to search for theories which either minimized differences between the sexes or which showed how sex differences were primarily a byproduct of socially created gender

roles, not biology. Feminists of this period made an important distinction between sex and gender. For these feminists, biological sex was not the same as social gender. They argued that gender is learned through socialization processes begun in early childhood, and, therefore, that male and female attributes were neither inbred nor immutable. They recast structural-functional models of the family that explained role dichotomies by associating psychological, if not biological traits, with each of the sexes, to emphasize the sociohistoric and economic changes which had engendered such dichotomies.

Catharine Stimpson has referred to this period of time in recent history as a minimalist period.² Curiously, whether intentional or not, the minimalists' distaste for difference and call for gender (woman) as a unit of analysis led to, what Eisenstein sees, as the beginnings of a radical shift in thinking among contemporary feminists. Whether one argued that women were a class, caste, minority, or a majority, it was clear that they shared something profoundly important with one another (Eisenstein, 1983, 45). Moreover, that which they shared in common with one another was clearly different from that which they shared with men. Ironically, but I prefer to think of it as logical (but not inevitable) turn of theoretical events, the seeds of minimalist thinking gave birth to a new state of feminist thinking.

The maximalists championed a woman-centered analysis.³ Such a focus encouraged a critique of masculinity and a search for the androcentric biases in theoretical thinking. With masculinity under investigation, Eisenstein notes, thinking was reversed. "From this point of view," she writes, "maleness was the difference or men were the other" (1979, p.xix). If men were the other, then all that had been culturally and historically associated with them (for instance, competition, excessive individualism, aggression, impersonality, materialism) could be viewed from a new critical perspective. This led to a reevaluation of that which was feminine. In Jean Miller's work, for instance, psychological qualities once associated with the "weaker sex" were now celebrated as indicators of strength (Eisenstein, 1983, 64).

The revaluing of the feminine also led to a reevaluation of "her" sphere, the family. From amid this gno-centric focus, and the effort to recapture the female experience and feminine values, a more extreme position arose. That which was feminine was not only celebrated but the gender hierarchy was inverted. Mary Daly's (1978) work may be the most representative of this kind of feminist discourse. Clearly missing from this position is the understanding that gender roles are social constructions and that the linking of the male to the public and the female to the private domain owed as much to a sociohistoric course of events as to some essentialist quality of being female or biology.

My current study of baalot teshuva has helped me put into perspective this shift in contemporary feminist thinking. For the remainder of this paper I would like to compare and contrast some maximalist feminists and nineteenth century feminists to the baalot teshuva I have studied.

The Baalot Teshuva Under Study

In this paper I shall report on data from only one of seven cities wherein I have and continue to interview, and only on currently married women. Fifty baalot teshuva were interviewed over a two year period. The interviews covered a core of predefined topics but were unstructured and indepth. Individuals were allowed to converse at will following key questions and probes. The interviews lasted from two and one-half to five and one-half hours with an average of slightly over three hours. The focus of the interviews was on the history of women's return to orthodoxy, their current familial life-style, and their views about gender roles. A ten-page demographic questionnaire was left with each respondent along with a stamped envelope for its return.

Several methods were used to locate respondents. Interviews with leading rabbis in the city helped to define the major baal teeshuva communities. The major community and two smaller ones were identified. So as to achieve a broad representation, interviewees were initially located through rabbis in each of those communities. Once within the communities, the referral method or "snowball" technique was used. Interviewees were asked for names and addresses of people they knew about, rather than friends' names or people they knew personally (although such names were also permissable). In this way, the population under study was more than a network of friends but, also, a sample of those persons, who, for religious reasons, live in easily identified communities. Interviewing was complete when no new names were generated.⁴

The literature on contemporary baalei teshuva, those who have grown up or lived outside the traditional Jewish beliefs and practices of orthodoxy and have found their way to or "returned" to Judaism, is spotty and inconsistent, ranging from popular press articles to a full-length, scholarly book by Janet Aviad, entitled Return to Judaism. None have focused specifically on women.

In my own work, I have defined the baal teshuva (singular form of baalei teshuva and, more specifically, the baalat teshuva (female singular form) in two different ways: as a woman who is currently practicing and/or believes in Orthodox Judaism and who is more traditional in her practice/belief than her parents, or as a woman who is currently practicing and/or believes in orthodoxy who had lapsed in practice/belief for some period of time in her life. For me the important component is that the individual exhibits some element of choice over her life cycle in

the face of options. Orthodoxy in this study is measured in two ways: strict observance of all the Sabbath laws and strict observance of all the laws of Kashruth (Jewish dietary laws).

The return, at least among the majority of women, ranging from 21 to 42 years of age, is somewhat similar to the profile of those entering new religious cults (Melton, 1983). Such people are described as fairly well educated, white, middle class, college age or slightly older, experiencing a transitional stage of life.

Despite age and some demographic differences, content analyses of the interview material reveals certain persistent themes. Specifically, attitudes about the value and worth of women and their ties to the family and the meaning of family life. In retelling their stories of return, women reported a common experience, that their lives had been spiritually empty and/or without meaning before their return. The meaninglessness of modern living became a euphemism for specific issues, most commonly those expressed in what these women saw as a cultural ambivalence and confusion toward women, toward women's sexuality, and toward the family and gender roles. All women expressed some concern over the loss of boundaries in marital, familial, and sexual relations.

All of the women referred to Orthodox Jewish law as asserting the value of women and the roles they play; of making holy, and therefore meaningful, even the most mundane and natural of activities; of bringing the ethical into the physical world of reality. One woman phrased it this way:

Orthodoxy provides a spirituality to life which gives meaning and direction to all of my activities...the practical everyday things are made holy...even our sexual relations are done under the watchful eye of 'ha-shem' (Yiddish reference to God)...it makes spiritual even the most physical acts of life.

Almost to a woman the baalot teshuva in this study believe in clear and persistent differences between the sexes. They assert an unambiguous "profamily" stance based on their claims to moral superiority in that arena. They affirm gender differentiation and celebrate traditional feminine qualities, particularly those associated with mothering. They reject Western values for both men and women which focus on the material rather than the spiritual. They see religious values, and therefore the normative structure of their society, as consonant with the "light" and nurturance they define as essentially female. Many claim that the spiritual, like the family, is essentially their realm. Many are actively trying to reclaim a feminine tradition within Judaism.⁵

Manis Friedman, head teacher of one of the most important

institutions for baalot teshuva describes the importance of the feminine within hasidic thought.⁶ Friedman writes "the word 'passive' means receptive. It means humble, but there's more to it as well. Passive means infinite" (1981, p. 11). Friedman stresses that it is hasidic thought which has revolutionized Judaism, particularly through the teachings of its founder, The Ba'al Shem Tov. Friedman interprets the Ba'al Shem Tov in the following way: "There's a masculine way of being Jewish which is fine and necessary, but we have to learn the feminine part of being Jewish" (1981, p. 12). Referring still to the Ba'al Shem Tov, Friedman writes: "The feminine part of being Jewish...is that part of the Jew (male or female) which is open, receptive to G-dliness. It's not concerned with evils, it doesn't want to change the world. It wants G-dliness. It absorbs G-dliness" (1981, p. 12). Friedman suggests that the masculine is of this world--"slaying the dragon of unholiness, combatting corruption, fighting off temptations"--the feminine pursuit is to care for the goodness in the world, to nurture and protect it.

The argument Friedman is building culminates in the following quote:

...We're all out there fighting the dragons. We're all out there trying to overcome the darkness, but what about the light? Who's taking care of it? Who's taking care of G-dliness and holiness in the world? Who has a sensitivity for right? We're all very sensitive about what's wrong, but who still knows what's right? Who still has a feeling for the G-dliness that you can't always explain? Generally, women (1981, p. 14).

In her thorough and excellent paper on the feminine and Jewish mysticism (in her paper "Chassidus"), Susan Handleman shows the correspondences among body, essence and the female: "...the higher an idea is...the more concealed and "lower" the form of its expression...it follows then that in this lowest, crude, physical world where God is so concealed, there must be found an aspect of the highest essence, and indeed chassidus proposes that the truly remarkable thing in the universe is the physical" (1984 10). It is the relationship between the body and the female that is of particular concern. Handleman continues: "...the body potentially has the capacity to express or relate to essence more than the more "spiritual" levels of man. The body is a more appropriate vehicle in which and by which to reveal essence. In the world to come, and at the time of the Messiah, the purified body will be the vehicle of the highest revelations of the essence of God, not the soul...the same holds true for the feminine principle which is associated with the body, the physical, concealment, essence..." (1984, p. 10). The baalot teshuva's reference to the purity ritual of "mikvah" and the attention to their bodies based upon menstruation relates not only to their sexuality within marriage but, as they stress, their relationship to God. Ultimately, the baalot teshuva believe that the feminine is closer to essence than the

masculine.

Feminism for the majority of these women 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 they felt most contemporary feminists disregarded and devalued. Ironically, however, they used feminist rhetoric and foci when describing their gains. This is especially evident in their discussion of the laws of "niddah." These laws demand a two-week sexual separation between husband and wife during her menstrual cycle (see footnote for discussion of family purity laws).⁷

Almost all women under study noted the positive functions of "niddah"; from claims of increased sexual satisfaction within the marriage ("forced separation increases desire") to increased time for self ("it allows me a bed of my own") to control over one's own sexuality ("I can say no with no pretence of a headache if I wish"). Among the more well-read on the subject, Orthodox Jewish writings by "feminists" were cited. The respondents would argue that the word unclean is not an appropriate contemporary understanding of "niddah." They preferred the word impure, for they argued if something is impure in one state, it is then pure in another. For them the purifying ritual necessary after one's menstrual cycle clearly places them in a sacred realm. Most claimed an increased awareness of their bodies and the rhythms of their lives given their own bodily functions.

Baalot Teshuva and Feminist Theories

It seems to me it would be too easy to describe this return among contemporary women as simply a seeking of order, stability, and security in a world bereft of overarching standards; or simply as a response to the fragmentation experienced by those living in a post-industrial society (although indeed all clearly contribute to a search for meaning). Our explanations must also include the effect the women's movement and contemporary familial and gender role experiences have had on the direction of that search as well. Included in this spiritual return (although I do not wish to downplay a high level of religious commitment) is also a search for new meaning in women's lives as wives and mothers. Roles that every major national survey suggests young women intend to play (Herzog et al., 1980). This return phenomenon may be as much a return to a revalued domesticity as to religious spirituality.

Revisionist historians have begun to unfold the letters, diaries, and books of feminist reformers which may be better understood by these contemporary "returnees" than the 19th century audiences for whom they were intended.⁸ For instance, purity practices of twentieth century baalot teshuva resemble Rosaldo's interpretation of purity and pollution beliefs among

some nineteenth century women. She writes:

Purity beliefs seem to be particularly attractive to women who often elaborate the norms concerned with purity, the rules for strict dress and demeanor, modesty, cleanliness, and prudishness, which they use as a contrasting device for contrasting their world and the men's world...(Rosaldo, 1974, p. 38).

As Rosaldo notes, while the ideas of purity and pollution were often used to circumscribe female activities, they may, she adds, "also be used as a basis for assertions of female solidarity, power or value" (1974, p. 38).

Other similarities exist among these returnees and nineteenth century feminists. For instance, Gordon writes that, in general, those feminists did not challenge conventional conceptions of woman's passivity nor her natural moral superiority. For them, "patience, tenderness, self-control, dependability, and warmth were not only instinctive but sex-linked" (Gordon, 1977, :115). They did not reject conventional marriage and family, writes Gordon, but wished to strengthen women in those roles. "Theirs was not a direct challenge to capitalism and the spirit of competition and aggression it had spawned but rather a revaluing of the feminine and her sphere of influence" (Gordon, 1977, :115).

Why one hundred years later do we see among some contemporary women similar sentiments? Many "returnees" phrase their responses to questions in the ways that some contemporary academic feminists have used as challenges to their own disciplines. For instance, Carol Gilligan (1982) writes of women's different moral voice and development in challenge to Kohlberg's models based primarily on men's patterns of moral development; Sarah Ruddick (1980) speaks of a different quality of thinking unique to women as a different philosophical category of thinking, one she calls maternal.

The baalot teshuva argue their choice of life-style within a contemporary familial context.⁹ They regard orthodoxy---from the laws of "niddah" to the value and dignity accorded them as wives and mothers--as institutional protection. In this sense they are not dependent upon individual males but upon a theology they believe "feminine in principle."

It is not unexpected then that feminine values take on a new meaning in a world highly segregated, as Orthodox Jewish communities, along gender lines. Gender differences become exaggerated. A new consciousness is brought to the definition of female. In this context men become the "other." Moreover, femininity and that which is associated with it is also seen as the source for dominant values for the community as a whole. This is strikingly similar to maximalist claims for a revaluing

of the feminine, on her own terms, in order to retrieve sources of positive values not only for the female but for society at large.

Other similarities are also apparent. Both believe in clear and persistent differences between sexes. For some among both groups, the highest levels of spirituality are reached, if not recognized, through the female body and her experience. The journey or return to orthodoxy among the women I have studied, and, for instance, Mary Daly's "journey inward," begins with a quest for truth. Both searches are mediated through the specific experiences of being female. With Daly the search ends with a return to the self; among the baalot teshuva the journey ends with a return to orthodoxy. Both journeys lead to the discovery of the essence of femininity and to the acknowledgement of the intrinsic moral superiority of women.

The focus on female sexuality (though with radically different conclusions) is also of key importance to both groups. Both maximalist feminists and baalot teshuva wish to gain from men control over their bodies and sexuality. Some radical feminists do so by following separatist policies; the baalot teshuva do so by appealing to orthodox laws which they claim give them control over their own sexuality.

Both maximalists and baalot teshuva share some common problems with some of the nineteenth century feminists. All, for instance, attempt to create their own social and physical space, on their own terms, but fail to challenge the power relations inherent in the larger reality they share with men. The creation of a separate or private realm where the values associated with women can be safely nurtured and nourished mistakes that which is personally valued by the women for that which is socially valued by the society at large. What is not challenged are the mechanisms---social, cultural, economic and political---which create and maintain male hegemony.

Footnotes

1. Patriarchy is a term often found in feminist writings. In general, while feminists may have different emphases, the term has come to mean the universal oppression of women by men. As Eisenstein notes, "the rule of the fathers" may be done by force, ritual, law, language, division of labor, but it always refers to the fact that everywhere woman is subsumed under the male" (1983, p.5).
2. I have borrowed the term minimalist and maximalist from Catharine Stimpson's keynote address at Wheaton College's Conference entitled: Balancing the Curriculum (June, 1984).
3. A woman-centered analysis is the view that the female experience ought to be the major focus of study and the source of dominant values for the culture as a whole (Eisenstein, 1983, p.

47). This, of course, is the base from which women's studies scholarship emerged.

4. The names generated did not necessarily include women from the same neighborhood, "shule" (synagogue), or same hasidic group. Over seventy-five new names were generated. Some respondents, however, upon interviewing did not meet the baalot teshuva criterion (10), or were no longer baalot teshuva (5). There were only two refusals. One woman, a wife of a rabbi, agreed and then decided after consultation with her husband not to give the interview. The other refusal was not so forthright. After five cancelled appointments, I decided the respondent did not wish to be interviewed. The high response rate was matched by the return of 45 out of 50 (90%) mail-out questionnaires left with each respondent after the interview.

The American Jewish Committee describes Hasidism this way:

The Hasidic world is one of strict orthodox observance, often involving mystical beliefs and, in varying degrees, insulation from the modern outside world. Hasidim observe not only the letter of Jewish law, but also customs pertaining to lifestyle, celebration and mode of dress, distinct to themselves or to their particular sect. It is a self-contained world, in which entire communities center around a Rebbe (leader-Rabbi) whose roots are planted in dynasties and whose influence over the lives of his followers goes far beyond matters of Jewish observance (New Pockets of Jewish Energy, 1982, p. 10).

5. This reclamation is in stark contrast to other Jewish feminists. See, for example, the reader edited by Susannah Heschel (1983). The baalot teshuva under study are attempting to reclaim a revalued femininity within a male-dominated tradition. Heschel and others challenge women's dependence on a legal system of theological law conceived and operated entirely by men.
6. For a thorough and excellent paper on the feminine principle within Jewish mysticism, see Susan Handleman's paper (1984).
7. The family purity laws are often referred to as the laws of "niddan". The major biblical source for them are in the book of Leviticus (Lev. 15: 19-24) wherein women were defined as unclean ("tumah", which is perhaps better interpreted as impure) for seven days following the onset of their menstrual flow. By the medieval period it had been extended to fourteen days. At present, menstrual impurity lasts from the half day prior to the onset of menstruation, for at least five days thereafter, and for seven more days in which no blood is evident. During the time when a woman is in "niddan," she may have no physical contact with her

husband--no hand-holding, no kissing, and of course no sharing of a bed. Most women in this study practice "negiah" wherein they do not touch or even hand any object directly to their husbands. On the evening of the seventh clean day a woman must immerse herself in a ritual bath called the "mikven"; a procedure which allows her to resume a physical relationship with her husband.

8. For instance the right to say no to one's husband highlights the similarities between women returning to Orthodox Judaism in the latter half of the 20th century and feminists, particularly those advocates of voluntary motherhood, at the end of the 19th century. At the heart of the 19th century movement was woman's sexual and, consequently, reproductive autonomy, reflected, for instance, in the right of the wife to say no (see especially, Hayden, 1982; Gordon, 1977). An even more striking similarity is the concern for motherhood among both populations. Linda Gordon reminds us that: when the word 'feminist' first appeared in the United States in the early twentieth century, it referred to a particular strain among women's rights advocates, one that asserted the uniqueness of women, the special joys and even mystical experience of motherhood (Gordon, 1977, p.xiv). Therefore, while feminists, suffragists, and even some free lovers were arguing for the control over their bodies by their right to refuse their husbands, it was never argued at the expense of motherhood.

Indeed, Gordon argues that the arm of the feminist community that campaigned for voluntary motherhood would not endorse birth control because of their awareness that a possible consequence of effective contraception would be the separation of sexuality from reproduction--a seeming attack on the family either by encouraging extramarital sex or by separating sexuality from parenting. Feminists of that period took the cultural ideology of that time (the cult of motherhood, sometimes refers to as the cult of domesticity) and turned it to their advantage. They tried to gain autonomy for women by imposing boundaries taken from a legitimate pervading cultural ideology (the cult of motherhood). Not surprising or even ironic, the contemporary women in this study, because they do not envision any workable alternatives, use the boundaries of traditional Judaism to define their autonomy.

9. The baalot teshuva discuss their return within the context of what they claim is a crisis in family life citing, and not inaccurately, rising rates of divorce, adultery, and violence within the modern nuclear family.

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