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# 17

# Paradoxical Politics: Gender Politics Among Newly Orthodox Jewish Women in the United States

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## Introduction

One issue emerging in this book on identity politics and women is how to analyze and evaluate the relationship between the worldwide rise of fundamentalist identities (Christian, Jewish, Islamist) and the gender politics of a feminist identity. At first, there appears to be little to discuss, as such identities are politically and theoretically incompatible. Yet recent theoretical trends suggest that this might too easily overlook the complexities of identity formation in general, and the potential for ambiguities, if not contradictions, in the specification of either a fundamentalist or a feminist identity over the life course.

The formation of a religious or a gender identity involves power-laden negotiations between the "self" and the "other." Both are developed within the constraints of culturally available meanings and specific power constraints and conditions. As Dorinne Kondo asserts, the identities that make up our concepts of self may be more like "strategic assertions" rather than "fixed essences."[1] Neither a fundamentalist nor a feminist identity is "fixed," as both are constructed and emergent. Moreover, neither a fundamentalist nor a feminist discourse is limited to just one invariant socio-historical tradition or one set of political possibilities. In this chapter, I shall explore more fully some of the counter-intuitive aspects of the gender identity politics of a non-Christian subset of fundamentalist women in the United States

(newly Orthodox Jewish women) and compare and contrast their politics to those of contemporary radical, cultural feminists.[2]

In each chapter in this book we see how women are central to the construction of religious and ethnic identities. Jewish Orthodoxy is no exception. As women do in other fundamentalist traditions, orthodox Jewish women mark religious/ethnic boundaries (only children born of a Jewish mother are considered Jewish) and by their behavior and dress signify who belongs to the collectivity and who does not. They are seen as the cultural carriers of orthodoxy and are expected to transmit that heritage to future generations.[3] As with other fundamentalist groups,[4] gender politics, and consequently gender identity, are at the heart of Jewish orthodoxy.

## Historical Backdrop to the Orthodox Jewish Revival: Youth and Its Discontents

The return to fundamentalist Biblical religion among the New Christian right in America has been accompanied, with less media attention, by a renewed interest in Jewish orthodoxy.[5] And, while this phenomenon of "return," as it is translated from the Hebrew, is of interest in general, the turn to orthodoxy, or for that matter any patriarchal religious tradition among women, in the closing decades of the twentieth century, is particularly intriguing.

The 1960s marked a period of social turbulence in the United States—rapid technological advances, the full emergence of the civil rights movement, urban riots, the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, anti-war protests, the beginnings of the women's movement, racial pride among Blacks, flower-children, drug culture, and strong anti-establishment feelings, particularly among young people. The countercultural upheavals of the 1960s gave birth to an upsurge of cults, quasi-religious therapeutic movements as well as an evangelical and neo-pentecostal revival. Jewish Orthodoxy, unfashionable and outmoded throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s participated in this neo-orthodox revival and "new" religious ferment.

The links between this heightened spirituality and the counterculture are many. The "hippie" movement, as the counterculture has often been referred to, was characterized both by its anti-rational thrust and its rejection of conventional values, particularly those that represented a technocratic, bureaucratic society dependent on science as the primary source of truth.[6] The countercultural rejection took many forms: expressed at times through drugs, or politics, or music. At times the values were contradictory—"tuning in, turning on, and dropping out" versus political struggle against racism, sexism, poverty and war. At times God was declared dead, at other times only moribund, and sometimes rediscovered. Among the newly orthodox women in my study, more than two-thirds (104) were involved in one form or another of the countercultural turbulence of the sixties and seventies.



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.[7]

## The Study

The data reported in this chapter reflect in-depth interviews conducted with 150 newly orthodox Jewish women (called *ba'alot teshuvah* in Hebrew) in the mid-1980s, in five major urban areas across the United States.[8] Interviews with leading rabbis, lay community leaders, and known ba'alot teshuvah in each of five major urban cities across the United States helped locate newly orthodox women within three identifiable frameworks in contemporary orthodoxy—modern orthodox (25), strictly orthodox (40), and ultra-orthodox (85).[9] While all orthodox Jews acknowledge that *Halakha* (Jewish law) is basic and essential to Judaism, they vary in their style of dress, their relationship to the secular world, and their interpretation of some laws, with modern orthodox being the most "liberal," and ultra-orthodox the most "stringent."

Although it seems obvious why men might be drawn to religious communities steeped in patriarchal tradition and staunchly opposed to any changes in the clear sex-segregation of religious roles, it is much more difficult to explain women's attraction. But what is most puzzling is that although many ba'alot teshuvah openly reject feminism or what they perceive feminism to represent and advocate, they simultaneously maintain a gender consciousness that resonates with some aspects of contemporary and past feminist ideology. Like some feminists, these newly orthodox Jewish women celebrate the female, her life-cycle experiences and feminine attributes, however, they eschew feminist politics by choosing to enhance the status of women and to protect them as a group within the boundaries of patriarchal religion and social structure.[10]

Sixty-six percent of the women I interviewed (99) were in their late teens and early to middle twenties in the decade between 1966 and 1976. Therefore, most of the women in this study began their journeys

toward orthodoxy in their youth during the counterculture, or in its wake. Of these women, almost seventy-one percent (70) identified with the "hippie" counterculture of the sixties and early seventies. That is, they either had ties to the seemingly apolitical lifestyles associated with the counterculture (such as drugs, music, dress) or to radical political organizations and protests. Few characterized themselves as leaders in any of the groups of which they were a part. Although some began their protest as teenagers in high school, most were involved during their college years. The most common radical politics among this group included civil rights demonstrations, university protests, marches, and/or anti-Vietnam protests, and, for a few, farm protests.

Twenty-five women claimed to have identified with and/or participated in the women's movement. Ten had been actively involved in feminist consciousness raising groups. Although twelve women were active in the pro-choice campaigns of the early seventies, most of the women under study described themselves during their searching years as pro-choice and claimed that certainly in appearance they were "liberated" women. Their embracing of orthodoxy, long before most even believed in it, demanded that they give up the freedom many of them had come to associate with jeans/pants and little underwear. Although the drastic change in their lifestyles at first seems contradictory, on closer observation, their change from radical left to radical right appears congruent with the most important issues these women faced at that stage of their lives.

Those women who had identified with the women's movement, for instance, eventually were disappointed by what they perceived to be the concerns of the early women's movement. For many, the focus on individual rights and personal independence left the larger issues of "how to live one's life" in a meaningful manner unformulated. One woman elaborates on this theme:

> I was in a feminist consciousness raising group. We talked a good deal about our problems ... about being women, students, lovers, and working women. ... We talked about whatever it was that was going on in our lives at that time, but we never really were able to formulate anything beyond or larger than ourselves. ... We were good at defining the negatives. ...

Those attracted to other politically liberal causes found that, both as women and as whites, they felt marginalized. For instance, women who had been involved in "left politics," felt, in their words, that "men ran the show ... we ran off the leaflets and made the coffee." Others, by the end of the sixties, no longer felt "comfortable" as whites and as Jews, in



the Civil Rights movement.[11] Other studies of that same period corroborate some of these sentiments. For instance, in their study of the Jesus Movement, Richardson, Stewart, and Simmonds note that former political activists felt that the Civil Rights movement had excluded whites by the end of the sixties.[12]

Many of these ba'alot teshuvah describe the late sixties and early to mid-seventies as a time of growing disillusionment and frustration for them. They describe themselves as concerned about the Draft, the War in Vietnam and later, for some, the Watergate scandal and the Kent State University killings. As one woman put it: "You know, all the 'macho' issues." Disillusioned, feeling marginal, and perhaps as Richardson, Stewart and Simmonds note, shocked at a state that was willing to kill its children, either abroad or at home, forty-nine of these self-identified countercultural women moved from secular, political, activist identities to Jewish orthodoxy. Twenty-one detoured on their way to Jewish orthodoxy by joining either one of the "new" religious or one of the personal growth movements of the late sixties and early seventies.

Overall, over one-third of all the ba'alot teshuvah joined or participated in the "new" religious or quasi-religious therapy movements of the sixties and seventies, ranging from the oriental/mystical traditions (such as Zen, transcendental meditation, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, sufism, and yoga) to the personal growth movements (such as est or scientology). Yet despite the attraction, all fifty-four of those who had joined or participated in "new" religious, or quasi-religious therapy or personal growth movements, found them disappointing.

Reflecting back on those years, the majority of those involved in Eastern mystical groups (30) felt that such groups were too focused on the self through "inner spiritual awakening" and "intrapsychic" consciousness, and too unfocused on fixed moral codes as a guide for their everyday behavior. One woman referred to her early seventies experiences with transcendental meditation as if it were "a great big organized be-in." She remembers that "Something was missing, I didn't want to be, I wanted to do. I wanted to feel I could make decisions that would lead to 'right' actions." The focus on self and "inner consciousness" troubled many who had become involved in quasi-religious therapy, therapeutic, and human potential movements as well. The relativistic and subjective moral systems of monistic movements, and the predominant focus on inner consciousness in the quasi-religious therapy groups,[13] forced many of these women to continue searching

for a coherent system of beliefs and a stable moral community meaningful to them.

For the remainder of the ba'alot teshuvah, that is, even for those who were not politically aware during the sixties, or who had come into their young adult years in the late seventies, and/or who were not from upwardly mobile, middle-class families, similar themes emerged: their search for a moral community of both public and private virtue, and, above all, their need for a moral framework in which to make decisions. The need, as one woman put it, for "official values." Jewish orthodoxy provided these women with clear ethical guidelines and both historic and transcendental ties. Moreover, it was a tradition with which many of them were, if not knowledgeable, familiar.

## Findings

Most ba'alot teshuvah describe themselves as trying to make moral sense of their lives. As they told their stories of return, women reported a common experience: that their lives had been spiritually empty and without purpose before their return. Regardless of age, virtually all women suggest that they were "searching." Some labeled that quest a "journey homeward." I was to find some irony in that designation, for although it initially implied that they were seeking their roots as Jews, it also served as a metaphor for what orthodoxy meant to them—home, family and a moral community with clear dictates about how to live both one's public and private life. Their "return" to orthodoxy, in some fundamental way, constitutes a protest against secular society which many characterized as masculine in orientation and organization.

In this context of a search for guidelines, the very admission that orthodoxy may not be the literally revealed word of God destroys orthodoxy's claims to truth, and therefore, to the certainty about guidelines it offers for moral, ethical, and meaningful decision making. Therefore accommodations to the law which are commonly found in the more "progressive" wings of Judaism (Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative), while serving some contemporary needs, also serve to undermine any claim to absolute authority.

However, there is more to orthodoxy's appeal than moral certitude. What maintains these ba'alot teshuvah's commitment was couched in terms of women's personal needs. For many, one of the most troubling qualities of contemporary living (most realized perhaps in the fragmentation of a postmodern context) was expressed as the culture's confusion and ambivalence toward women, women's sexuality, family and gender roles. Even for those who had been part of the women's



movement, many did not feel that there was a coherent set of social norms governing expectations about gender roles. On the contrary, they believed that the dismantling of many of the gender-related norms, spurred by the women's movement, often left women more vulnerable to men's manipulation than ever before. Most felt this was particularly true in the area of sexuality.[14] One young woman noted:

> I needed something that spoke to me directly about being a woman ... decisions about my sexuality, for instance. I had had enough of one night stands ... orgasm alone was just that, an orgasm—masturbation could and did fulfill the same function. I didn't want moralizing, I wanted to know how sexuality would fit into my life, you know over the long haul. Orthodoxy had an answer to that ... when I learned about the family purity laws ... they immediately made sense to me. In fact, my boyfriend and I practiced *taharat hamishpacha* [family purity laws, regulating sexuality and requiring a two-week abstinence each month during the woman's menstrual cycle] while we were living together. Neither of us could take our sexuality or me for granted.

A recently engaged woman expressed her search for familial values in a community which supports those values in these terms:

> Both my fiancé and I are on the job market together. Since we have become orthodox we have made some very important decisions. We are looking for jobs which give both of us real flexibility. I mean we want time for ourselves and time for family in our lives. An orthodox life-style promotes that—family comes first. It is clear to both of us right from the beginning that our family life will have priority over everything else we do. Menachem [fiance's fictitious name] will be a part of a community that enforces that commitment and I will be part of a community that makes that commitment real.

"You know," volunteered one older, divorced woman

> Orthodoxy provides a game plan. At first you accept a whole system, letter perfect, that has survived thousands of years. Yet, even though it has such history it speaks directly to you on a day to day, week to week, season to season basis. It speaks to you about the most personal things in your life—the way to go about dealing with others, your friends, your husband, your children, even how to go about having sex.

Interestingly, these women claim that their "return" to the patriarchal setting of orthodoxy put them in touch with their own bodies, in control of their own sexuality, and in a position to value the so-called feminine virtues of nurturance, mutuality, family, and motherhood. Indeed, they describe orthodoxy as "feminine in principle," correlating that which is associated with the female in orthodoxy with the spiritual and sacred meaning of life. It is in orthodox Judaism, they assert, that they have found their identities as women. "You know," says one unmarried twenty-three year old, "I think this is the first time in my life I have felt really good about being a woman."

The specialness of woman and the importance of her sphere of activity were stressed throughout the interviews and often juxtaposed to a rather rigid conception of what they described as feminism. The majority of these women define feminism as a movement which dismisses differences between men and women and focuses on the world of work, where equal pay is the most important issue. Most felt that the priorities set by feminists neglected the family and what they believed to be important feminine values. In general, these women believed they had gained a new dignity through their orthodoxy and especially through their roles in the family, a pride they felt feminists either disregarded or devalued.

The ba'alot teshuvah share the "official" patriarchal belief system of orthodox Judaism and a belief system that emerges organically from their everyday lives as women in a highly sex-segregated community. They believe that community is critical if orthodox Jewish life is to be preserved.[15] For them, female activities and systems of meaning are as vital to orthodox Judaism as are men's. They do not see their sphere as inferior, but rather as a place where they are free to create their own forms of personal, social, intellectual, and, at times, political relationships. Whether intentional or not, sex-segregated living seems to provide these women with the resources on which they can build a community of meaning and action. By accepting and elaborating on the symbols and expectations associated with gender difference, these ba'alot teshuvah claim they have some control over their sexuality and marital lives. They seem to transcend the domestic limits set by patriarchal living, not by entering a man's world, but by creating a world of their own. Awareness of gender hierarchy and empowerment issues are less focused for these newly orthodox women in such a sex-segregated environment. The solidarity, self-esteem, and strength they receive from this world reinforces them in their celebration of difference and woman-centered values.



## Comparisons Between Newly Orthodox Jewish Women and Radical Feminists

Both newly orthodox Jewish women and some contemporary feminists, despite radically different politics, argue for celebrating women's culture and women's "unique" biological, emotional, temperamental, psychological, and spiritual qualities. For both newly orthodox Jewish women and some contemporary radical feminists, the male-defined culture of secular society typically is seen as a source of social problems: war, violence, and aggression. The radical feminism referred to in this chapter is described by Allison Jaggar as sparked by the "special experiences of a relatively small group of predominantly white, middle-class, college-educated, American women in the late 1960s." However, writes Jaggar, since its inception radical feminism has undergone some critical changes. In general, younger radical feminists are no longer as active in left organizations nor are they influenced as much by Marxist categories. Indeed, argues Jaggar, they are not "identified by adherence to an explicit and systematic political theory."[16] She notes:

> Instead, they are part of a grass-roots movement, a flourishing women's culture concerned with providing feminist alternatives in literature, music, spirituality, health services, sexuality, even in employment and technology. ... Because of the nature of their political practice, some of those whom I identify as radical feminists might now prefer to call themselves cultural feminists or lesbian feminists.[17]

It is to the more contemporary radical feminist movement and to the cultural radical feminists that the ba'alot teshuvah are compared in this section. Drawing on the works of such writers as Mary Daly and Susan Griffin, Jaggar concludes:

> The contemporary radical feminist movement is characterized by a general celebration of womanhood, a striking contrast to the devaluation of women that pervades the larger society. This celebration takes many forms. Women's achievements are honored; women's culture is enjoyed; women's spirituality is developed; lesbianism is the preferred expression of sexuality. ... Women's special closeness with nature is believed to give women special ways of knowing and conceiving the world. Radical feminists reject what they see as the excessive masculine reliance on reason, and instead emphasize feeling, emotion and nonverbal communication.[18]

Ynestra King supports Jaggar's characterization of radical feminists by suggesting that there are essentially two schools: radical rationalist feminists who repudiate the woman/nature connection and radical cultural feminists who celebrate the woman/nature connection. She writes: "The major strength of cultural feminism is that it is a deeply woman-identified movement. It celebrates what is distinct about women, challenging male culture rather than strategizing to become part of it."[19]

The contemporary radical feminists, Jaggar considers, believe that women are closer to nature than men. Jane Alpert describes the qualities unique to women in the following: "Feminist culture is based on what is best and strongest in women ... the qualities coming to the fore are the same ones a mother projects in the best kind of nurturing relationship to a child: empathy, intuitiveness, adaptability, awareness of growth ... ."[20]

In sum then, the radical feminists to whom Jaggar and King refer emphasize and celebrate the biological and psychological differences between the sexes wishing to develop new values based on women's traditional culture. In general, however, radical cultural feminists tend to ignore the complex, multidimensional and historically divergent life situations of women. Radical cultural feminists frame their understanding of human nature, and, consequently their politics, in an ahistorical context.

Not unlike many of these contemporary radical cultural feminists, the ba'alot teshuvah frame their understanding of gender differences in an essentialist framework as well. They, like radical cultural feminists, appear to attack those aspects of liberal patriarchy which focus on acquisitive individualism, self-indulgence, and a lack of value consensus (other than individual rights).[21] For the radical cultural feminists described by Jaggar and King and the newly orthodox Jewish women in my study, self-identity is not independent of separatist and sex-segregated social structure. However, unlike the radical cultural feminists, while many newly orthodox Jewish women acknowledge that secular culture and masculinist culture are essentially the same, they do not associate a masculine ethos with orthodox Judaism. Rather, they insist that Jewish orthodoxy is "feminine in principle." They hold this belief despite the fact that Jewish orthodoxy has maintained a religious-legal system that supports only heterosexual marriage, recognizes only the husband's right to divorce and leaves public religious leadership and devotion only in the hands of men.

As noted earlier, Orthodox Judaism's very attraction to these ba'alot teshuvah is that its moral certitude is embodied in the inviolability of



Jewish law. Therefore, to use their newly found collective female identity to radically transform any of the ritual or law would undermine orthodoxy's authority, certainty and appeal. Therefore, these women do not challenge male hegemony in the public, legal community that is identified as Jewish orthodoxy (the world of synagogue and study). They accept the very premise of orthodoxy which places men at the center of the religious community as rabbis, leaders, and as those who study and interpret the heart of orthodoxy—religious law. They do not explicitly acknowledge that the "feminine" virtues they celebrate also help to maintain a gendered religious division of labor. In this sense, they do not use their gender identity for confrontational politics with patriarchy.

The newly orthodox Jewish women derive a great deal of strength from their highly sex-segregated living. Women-centered support groups define and reinforce their sense of identity and worth. Significantly, Jaggar notes that a distinctive feature of radical feminist strategy for social change is to extol separate and autonomous women's organizations as the best means to accomplish women's liberation. As such, claims Jaggar, radical feminists tend to focus their energies into developing alternative social arrangements, rather than organizing direct confrontations with patriarchy.[22]

Like women-centered feminists, many ba'alot teshuvah and, indeed, other women of the new religious Right in America, celebrate gender differences. For many radical cultural feminists and for these ba'alot teshuvah, women represent a source of special strength, knowledge and power. Jaggar contends that radical feminists give "special value to women's reproductive functions and to the psychological characteristics that have distinguished women and men."[23] So, too, many of the ultra-Orthodox ba'alot teshuvah claim that there are natural differences between the sexes, and that women's superior moral sensibilities arise from their greater intimacy with the everyday physical world.

There are, however, clear differences between newly orthodox Jewish women and the radical feminists to whom Jaggar refers. Significant differences exist in the ways those radical feminists and the ba'alot teshuvah develop their feminist and feminine identities. The radical feminists *choose* sex-segregation as a way of resisting male dominance and as a way of shaping society. Sex-segregation and separatist institutions are a result of their feminist demands to be autonomous. The ba'alot teshuvah accommodate themselves to sex-segregated living established by patriarchal tradition. Therefore, the latter develop a female consciousness limited by the parameters of patriarchy. The former develop a feminist consciousness shaped by their resistance to

patriarchy. Both newly orthodox Jewish women and radical feminists emphasize the significance of sexuality, procreation, and mothering, but in significantly different ways. Where radical feminists often challenge the heterosexual and patriarchal definitions of sexuality and maternity, the ba'alot teshuvah do not. Radical feminists politicize the reproductive sphere, believing that it determines how economic production, as well as other forms of culture, are organized.[24] The ba'alot teshuvah have no analogous understanding of the politics of sexuality. They reclaim the value of sexuality and procreative practices, but within the limits of patriarchal definition.

## Gender Identity Politics and Fundamentalism

Newly orthodox Jewish women emphasize their uniqueness and difference from men in their efforts to rectify what they see as injustices and failures within liberal patriarchy to provide a clear set of moral values (other than those related to individual rights) and to bring public remedy to private injustices, especially those that exist between men and women. It would be too facile to describe the "return" of these contemporary women to religious orthodoxy as simply reactionary, or merely as their search for order, stability, and security in a world bereft of overarching standards. Explanations must also include their perceptions of how familial and gender-role experiences have directed that search as well. Indeed, the burgeoning literature on wife abuse, child abuse and rape within marriage reveals many of the stresses in contemporary familial living.[25]

There is the growing recognition that liberal feminism (at least as a popular movement) may have failed a significant number of women because it has not been able to develop a "politics of the personal," particularly for heterosexual women amid the destabilized family and work conditions of the past few decades.[26] For instance, vigorous legislative reforms aimed at promoting gender equality often fail to bring about real changes in the private arena of life, most particularly, in the role behavior of men.[27]

Although these women selectively adopt and even incorporate "protofeminist" attitudes and values into their familial lives, their female-consciousness is limited, at best, to mild reformist tactics and most certainly to concerns of only orthodox, heterosexual, Jewish women. Since these women's most important roles involve their functions as wives and mothers, unmarried, divorced, widowed, separated, and childless women face clear problems within such communities. Like many of the radical cultural feminists described



earlier, the ba'alot teshuvah approach their gender politics from an ahistorical and essentialist framework characterizing all women as similar in needs and motivations. Furthermore, while Jewish orthodoxy may provide them with a woman-centered identity and communal recognition of the importance of female-linked practices and symbols, newly orthodox women lack any power to change the social structural arrangements which reinforce essentialist formulations which become, by definition, unchangeable and therefore potentially repressive. These newly orthodox Jewish women differ markedly from feminists in that they argue their identity politics within the boundaries of patriarchal religious definition. They do not challenge patriarchal politics either sociologically or theologically.

## Conclusions

Gender identity and consequently gender politics are at the center of the practice of Jewish orthodoxy. As with other fundamentalist movements, women mark the boundaries of the group and are considered the carriers and transmitters of the tradition. Women not only produce religious differences, but their behavior signifies who belongs to the collectivity and who does not. But identities are negotiated as well as constrained. As women live longer and spend more time without children and without husbands, as most demographic projections suggest,[28] will the issues concerning their spirituality in the public religious community, as opposed to the private sphere of home, become more important to these newly orthodox Jewish women? Will the virulent attacks against the women, including orthodox women, who attempted to pray at the Western Wall in Israel (without violating Jewish law),[29] for instance, become more troublesome for these ba'alot teshuvah 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 these women to question their belief that a "feminine ethos," as collectively defined, is at the heart of orthodoxy?

As the dimensions of the private sphere of life change and as the female community continues to grow more knowledgeable in Jewish law, perhaps these women will be able to articulate more definitively and authoritatively the clear contradictions between what orthodoxy preaches and what it practices (for example, the potential for blackmail and coercion of husbands against wives in granting a divorce). Different historic times, like different lifecycle stages, demand different strategies. Because those strategies and the discourse presented in the support of

those strategies change, no patriarchal setting is quite the same or continues to be the same over time. And while "orthodoxy" is presented as the inviolable, ahistoric and only authentic voice of Judaism, the focus and the language of these, and other "born again" women, set at least some of the terms for ongoing discussions within fundamentalist communities. That some challenge has emerged to patriarchal law in Jewish orthodoxy is clear from both the slow, incremental changes for women in public rites and private rituals, and from the way feminism has entered into the authoritative discourse, even if only to be railed against.

Like religious discourse, feminist discourse(s) and strategies have shifted over time as well. All identities, religious or gendered, are negotiated, multiple, and potentially shifting over the life course and over time. Moreover, despite the clear differences between the radical feminists discussed earlier and these ba'alot teshuvah, it is not unreasonable to argue that some of the latter's values, goals, and strategies represent a variation on both contemporary and past feminist discourse and strategy. One of the many issues raised in this chapter has to do with the way in which cultural constructions of the female, female-linked symbols and separatism may be used as a political strategy.[30]

Some feminist theorists claim to base their theories in observation and to "acknowledge their construction as rooted in the concerns of the present."[31] This turn in feminist scholarship—wariness toward absolutes, recognition of complexities in our analyses and the political ramifications of our particular "fix on feminism"—helps us to reassess gender identity politics. Women have used their gender identity to culturally resist or challenge aspects of patriarchy, capitalism, technology, and, even feminism, as each is commonly understood at a particular socio-political moment in history.

The newly orthodox Jewish women raise important questions about the meaning of family, fundamentalism, the politics of gender identity, and feminism. Their stories, and those of other born-again women, reveal more than the antipathy of an anti-feminist religious Right. Their voices are the voices of women trying to cope with the inequities and imbalances of liberal patriarchy in a postindustrial order.[32] Therefore, despite many "born again" women's distrust of feminism, their focus on raising women's status, promoting female interests, and altering the gender-role behavior of men as fathers and husbands, resonate with issues long of concern to feminists and feminist identity politics.

I have been cautious about generalizing beyond the boundaries of the white, female, primarily middle-class, urban-dwellers I studied. I have



tried to base my theories "in observation" and to acknowledge that they are "rooted in the concerns of the present."[33] However, although I may locate a particular group of women in place and time, they are never stably fixed there; individuals negotiate their "locale" both in terms of their own histories and within the framework of the institutions that surround them. I am aware that the narratives these newly orthodox women recount resonate with other stories of women from the past and in the present, different from them in religion, class and ethnicity. However, comparisons to other groups of women, both past and present, are predicated on the assumption that similarities are artifacts of similar social constructions, not universal definitions.

I believe we are approaching a new stage in feminist intellectual history. A stage which maintains a tolerance for contradictions, ambiguities and fluid boundaries. By approaching, for instance, religious Right women from this perspective we can more readily see the contradictions and ambiguities and the challenges to fixity and unity their identity politics present. And while I may not be able to present "a truth" about newly orthodox Jewish women in the closing decades of the twentieth century, I hope I have added to a less false[34] set of narratives about gender, identity, feminism, and politics.

## Notes

This chapter draws from material in Chapter 6 of my book, *Rachel's Daughters* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

1. D. Kondo, *Crafting Selves* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 10.

2. See A. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983), and Y. King, "Healing the Wounds," pp. 115-141 in A. Jaggar and S. Bordo (eds.), *Gender/Body/Knowledge* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

3. See Yuval-Davis in this volume on ethnic identity and women for a more elaborate discussion.

4. See N. Ammerman, *Bible Believers* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987); E. Brusco, "Columbian Evangelicalism as a Strategic Form of Women's Collective Action," *Feminist Issues* 6 (2) (Fall 1986):3-13; R. Klatch, *Women of the New Right* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).

5. As with religious renewal in general, there is controversy about numbers and the meaning of Jewish orthodox revival. In particular, there is some controversy about whether the indicators of growth are signs of numerical growth or a by-product of increased organizational coherence and affluence

among Orthodox Jews (and therefore an increase in institutions serving that population).

6. See T. Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 1969); C. Glock and R. Bellah, *The New Religious Consciousness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); M. Yinger, *Countercultures: The Promised Peril of a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: The Free Press, 1982).

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

8. The five cities include: Boston, Cleveland, New York City (including Crown Heights), Los Angeles, and San Francisco.

9. Once within these settings, the referral method or snowball technique of sampling [J. Coleman, *The Adolescent Society* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1971)] was employed, thereby identifying smaller interactive groups of *ba'alot teshuvah* within each community. 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 of orthodoxy itself.

10. For a fuller discussion, see D. Kaufman "Women Who Return to Orthodox Judaism: A Feminist Analysis," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 47 (3) (1985):543-555; "Feminism Reconstructed: Feminist Theories and Women Who Return to Orthodox Judaism," *Midwest Sociologists for Women in Society* 5 (March 1985):45-55; "Patriarchal Women: A Case Study of Newly Orthodox Jewish Women," *Symbolic Interaction* 12 (2) (1989):299-314; *Rachel's Daughters, Newly Orthodox Jewish Women* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

11. Some feminists have written about anti-semitism in the feminist movement as well. See Letty Cottin Pogrebin, "Anti-Semitism in the Women's Movement: A Jewish Feminist's Disturbing Account," *Ms* (June 1982), pp. 15-19.

12. James Richardson, Mary Stewart and Robert Simmonds, *Organized Miracles* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1979).

13. S. Tipton, *Getting Saved in the Sixties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

14. Even some feminists have recanted on their earlier positions. Germaine Greer vehemently argues that the sexual revolution never happened: "Permissiveness happened, and that's not better than repressiveness, because women are still being manipulated by men" (Cited in *New York Times*, March 5, 1984, C 10).

15. For an historic example of Jewish women's claim to the preservation of human life, see Temma Kaplan, "Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910-1918," *Signs* 7 (13) (1982):545-566.

16. Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, pp. 83, 84. It is interesting to note that there are some strong demographic similarities between radical feminists described here and the newly orthodox Jewish women in this study.



17. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

19. Ynestra King, "Healing the Wounds," p. 123.

20. Cited in Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, p. 97.

21. In her comparisons between American and Japanese women, Kondo suggests that in "Western" culture, "the relationally defined self of American women still remains solidly within a linguistic and historical legacy of individualism" while in Japan, selves are inextricable from context. See Kondo, *Crafting Selves*, p. 33.

22. A. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, pp. 102, 104.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

25. For the majority of American women, work and family demands are incompatible. Despite massive increases in the labor force and legislative reform, women still earn less than men in every occupation, irrespective of their training, skills, and qualifications. (See Kaufman, "Patriarchal Women.") Moreover, well-trained and educated women may find their career lines limited by informal barriers to success, barriers which are hard to legislatively reform or even publically address. And while the structural conditions in the labor force have been difficult to change, the normative expectations surrounding households have not changed significantly either. Irrespective of paid employment, women maintain the major responsibility for domestic and child-care activities. See J. Pleck, "The Work-Family Role System," *Social Problems* 24 (1977):417-424; M. Fox and S. Hesse-Biber, *Women at Work* (Palo Alto, CA.: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1984).

26. In fact, feminists have been most aware of this problem. Among the earliest to address this concern was Zillah Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1981). For a good analysis of religion's appeal, see Judith Stacey and Susan Gerard, "We Are Not Doormats: Post-Feminist Evangelicalism in the U.S.," unpublished manuscript (Davis, California, University of California, 1988).

27. E. Brusco, "Columbian Evangelicalism," pp. 3-13.

28. See J. Giele, *Women and Future* (New York, N.Y.: The Free Press, 1982); Helena Lopata, *Women as Widows: Support Systems* (New York: Elsivere, 1979).

29. See, for instance, the article by Rabbi Susan Grossman and R. Susan Aranoff entitled: "Women Under Siege at the Western Wall," in *Women's League Outlook*, Spring 1990, pp. 7-10.

30. The strength of American feminism prior to 1920, argues Freedman, was the separate female community that helped to sustain women's participation in both social reform and political activities. She writes:

> When women tried to assimilate into male-dominated institutions, without securing feminist social, economic, or political bases, they lost the momentum and the networks which had made the suffrage movement possible. Women gave up many of the strengths of the female sphere without gaining equally from the men's world they entered.

(E. Freedman, "Separation as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870-1930," *Feminist Studies*, Fall 1979, p. 524).

31. L. Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1990), p. 5.

32. See J. Stacey, "Sexism by a Subtler Name?," *Socialist Review* (Nov./Dec. 1987):8-28.

33. L. Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism*, p. 5.

34. I am paraphrasing Sandra Harding's analysis of feminist epistemologies (S. Harding, "Feminism, Science, and the Anti-Enlightenment Critiques," in L. Nicholson. ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism*, pp. 83-106.)

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