

Religious Right Women and
Postfeminist Ideology

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The big lie of male supremacy is that women are less than fully human; the basic task of feminism is to expose that lie and fight it on every level. Yet for all my feminist militance I was, it seemed, secretly afraid that the lie was true--that my humanity was hopelessly at odds with my ineluctably female sexuality--while the rebetsen (wife of the Rabbi), staunch apostle of traditional femininity, did not appear to doubt for a moment that she could be both a woman and a serious person. Which was only superficially paradoxical, for if you were absolutely convinced that the Jewish woman's role was ordained by God, and that it was every bit as important spiritually as the man's, how could you believe the lie? (Ellen Willis, Rolling Stone Magazine, April 21, 1977, p. 76).

So wrote Ellen Willis, feminist and journalist after she had visited her brother, a recent convert to Orthodox Judaism in Israel. How is it that even such a committed feminist as Willis does not outrightly label the "rebetsen" an antifeminist or that she even tries to make "feminist" sense out of such a blatantly patriarchal religious tradition as Jewish Orthodoxy. The paradox Willis refers to is at the very heart of my forthcoming book about the attitudes, values, experiences and concerns of women who have voluntarily entered the patriarchal world of Jewish Orthodoxy.

The data reported in this paper reflect in-depth interviews conducted with 150 newly orthodox Jewish women (called ba'alot t'shvuva in Hebrew) in the mid 1980's, in five major urban areas across the United States. 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. Most puzzling is the discovery that although many ba'alot t'shuva openly reject feminism or what they perceive feminism to represent and advocate, they are not without a gender consciousness that resonates with the values of some feminists who celebrate the female, her life-cycle experiences and feminine attributes.² However, unlike feminists, they choose to enhance the status of women and to protect them as a group within the boundaries of patriarchal religion.³

Even more surprising was that while many ba'alot t'shuva minimized the importance of feminism in their lives, they used feminist rhetoric and emphases to describe their lives in orthodoxy. Contrary to the common assumption that non-feminist women are unable to identify as women and to act in their own interests, these ba'alot t'shuva are quite conscious of their status as women and defend that status. Nowhere is this awareness more evident than in their discussions of the laws of nidda, which prescribe a two-week

sexual separation between husband and wife during her menstrual cycle. The laws of nidda, which many have viewed to be typical of orthodox males' derogation of the female, are interpreted by these newly orthodox women as giving structure and regulation to human sexuality 4. One respondent's description captures the general attitude of these ba'alot t'shuva toward this most important dimension of their lives as Orthodox Jewish women:

I am a child of the liberated generation. Since we are talking about nidda now I will refer to sexual liberation although I think what I am saying applies to many areas of liberation...For all the sexual freedom I felt in my late adolescence and early adulthood I can tell you that it was more like sexual exploitation. I felt there were no longer any rules; on what grounds did one decide to say no? If the rule was casual sex and if you engaged in it on what grounds did you say no... What rules did you use? If you see what I'm saying, without overriding rules, or without protection of some sort, the sexual liberation meant that women were free to be exploited more by men...the laws of taharat hamishpacha (family purity laws) make so much sense. For instance, I am not a sex object to my husband; he respects me and respects my sexuality. Because he does not have access to me anytime he wishes, he cannot take me for granted. The separation restores our passion and places the control of it in my hands.

Perhaps even more significant is that these women claim that such laws provide them with more dignity and control over their own bodies than was possible in the secular world. Adopting the stance that many values and qualities associated with women, such as, mothering and the capacity for connectedness, are undervalued in society at large,

these ba'alot t'shuva link the feminine and the female with the sacred and spiritual meaning of life within the orthodox community. By so doing, they take the feminine (regarded in the secular world as low status and lacking authority) and turn it into a high status aspect of orthodoxy---the sacred. In the religious world, these women claim, the female and the family, and that which is associated with them, are seen as positive sources of value, not only for the self, but for the community as well.

Moreover, although embracing orthodoxy does not change, but rather reinforces traditional understandings of femininity and the female, it also makes a statement about male gender-roles. The ba'alot t'shuva claim that in Orthodox Judaism they are able to make demands upon men as husbands and fathers in ways they cannot in the secular world. They claim that the "masculine ethos" of aggression, violence, pride, self-indulgence, and individualistic orientation is replaced in the world of Jewish Orthodoxy with a "feminine ethos", stressing modesty, humility, and a collective orientation.

In orthodox Judaism there is an unambivalent profamily stance thereby creating a sense of priority and purpose for both men and women. For instance, despite their own work status and irrespective of other childcare arrangements, women feel they can and do make claims upon their husbands

for childcare services and responsibilities. Of the women who worked full time, all husbands had some, and, in one case close to half the responsibility for the care of children. An interesting combination of reasons accounts for this situation. Because of their religious commitment to prayer, study, the Sabbath (Saturdays) and the many religious holidays, both men and women create flexibility in their work patterns. Men's presence in the home, often during the day, provides them with frequent contact and often responsibility for childcare. This is especially true in the ultraorthodox communities where secular pursuits are given very low priority. Interestingly, although other scholars have pointed to the status brought to the orthodox community through the prestige professions of their adherents, among newly orthodox Jews this does not appear to be the case. Indeed, many of the husbands of the women I interviewed had given up very lucrative and prestigious jobs in order to accommodate religious obligations. These men tend to work either in the community as teachers, administrators, small businessmen, money collectors or for the religious community as recruiters. A common experience for many men was to abandon corporate careers for more flexible work settings. One route for some was to become consultants and/or to become computer analysts with a base at home. Even for husbands of non-ultraorthodox women, and

even for those with professional jobs, childcare was part of most men's daily responsibilities. Those men who had professional careers, such as lawyers and doctors, were all clearly involved with family and childcare responsibilities, most particularly on the Sabbath.

While husbands maintain a presence and have a clear role in childrearing and domestic responsibilities, it is also clear that most women believe that the links between their religious and domestic roles give them an edge in domestic decisionmaking and an important social status within the community. The ba'alot t'shuva regard the daily activities surrounding their domestic tasks (the maintaining of food, dress, and sabbath and holiday laws) not only as a way of distinguishing the orthodox Jewish community from the gentile world, and indeed even from other Jewish denominations, but as sacred ritual. The social practices associated with the everyday activities of domestic life are deeply intertwined with these women's religious lives. In a sense, these women have redrawn the boundaries of female private life and male public life, making their domestic roles their public/religious ones and bringing men into the private sphere.

The Context for a Turn to the Right

Despite their belief that they are valued in Orthodox Judaism, these ba'alot t'shuva remain second class citizens

within the corporate public community that calls itself orthodox. In Orthodox Judaism there are no significant roles for women in either the synagogue or in the world of study. Most blatantly, women are not given the opportunity to study the very texts which give meaning and interpretation to the code of law that rules their everyday lives. How then do we explain this turn toward orthodoxy among women who have grown up with or who have inherited the contemporary women's movement?

These ba'alot t'shuva argue their choice of community within a contemporary familial context. The divorce statistics and national surveys suggest that many Americans are facing a widespread crisis in personal life. The "normative order" which once bound individuals to marriage, childrearing and the many constraints and obligations required of family life has weakened. In The Hearts of Men, Ehrenreich claims that the contemporary moral climate in the United States endorses "irresponsibility, self-indulgence, and an isolationist detachment from the claims of others" realized most particularly in a flight from commitment to family (1983, p. 169).

The contours of the United States' current economy and its political ideology of individual rights, affect men and women differently, leaving women particularly vulnerable. While women have increasingly entered the paid workforce,

they have also increasingly become heads of households. Forty-three percent of households maintained by a woman alone live in poverty, compared with 8 percent of those maintained by a man, alone or in a married couple (Women's Economic Agenda Working Group, 1985, p.13). Even for the statistically few women who hold high-paying jobs and, who are, therefore, able to afford child care and domestic help, most women earn less than men despite their education, training, and experience (Kaufman, 1989). We are the only advanced industrial nation that has no public policy of support for the family, either as a family allowance or as publicly sponsored childcare. Our skyrocketing divorce rates over the past few decades have stabilized in the eighties to be among the highest in Western industrialized countries. And to be a single mother in our society is to often join the ranks of those in poverty or at the very least to drop precipitously in income (Weitzman, 1985; Arendell, 1986).

In addition to women's economic vulnerability, a political ideology of individual rights, as Lasch argues, is fundamentally opposed to family values. Lasch (1989) describes the ideology of liberalism as incapable of making sense of the family "...an institution that appears irrational in the sense that its members ideally do not think of their own interests and of the rights designed to

protect them, and that they promise to sustain each other through a life-time" (1989, p. 96).

In a society where the number of divorces is slowly coming to equal the number of marriages, where one in three women can expect to be sexually assaulted by a man during her lifetime,⁵ where women continue to earn unequal wages compared to men despite their talent, experience, and education, it is not surprising that since the mid-1970s many women have found their way to patriarchal religious communities where they can find what feminist sociologist Judith Stacey refers to as "patriarchal profamilianism". Communities where intimate relationships and the personal side of life can be stabilized. Places where women can make claims upon men that will be supported by structural and cultural institutions. Places where women believe the sex/gender system is organized around family-centered and woman-oriented values.

The ba'alot t'shvua well articulate their uneasiness about the quality of life, particularly for women, in the closing decades of the twentieth century. In general, most claim that orthodoxy enhances women's status, protects women as a group, and focuses both men and women on familial life. Claims for an enhanced status for women and for greater claims upon men as husbands and fathers within patriarchal religions have been made by other "born again" women as well.

Recently, empirical work on religious right women reveals issues and concerns similar to those of the ba'alot t'shuva. For instance, Elizabeth Brusco concludes from her field research in Colombia on the effects of conversion to evangelical Protestantism on the domestic lives of converts, that Colombian evangelicalism serves to reform gender roles in a way that enhances female status. She writes: "It promotes female interests not only in simple practical ways, but also through its potential as an antidote to machismo (the culturally constructed emphatic masculinity which constitutes a variant of the male role in Colombia as well as in other parts of Latin America)" (1986, p. 3).

For Brusco the revolutionary nature of the evangelical movement is its ability to place the home and family at the center of both men's and women's lives. "One outcome of conversion," writes Brusco, "is that the boundaries of public male life and private female life are redrawn and the spheres themselves are redefined" (1986, p. 6). She further notes:

The relative power positions of the spouses change. This is not to say that women now have power over their husbands. In evangelical households the husband may still occupy the position of head, but his relative aspirations have changed to coincide with those of his wife. I believe that this last fact constitutes a change of revolutionary proportions, and is the key to the analysis of Colombian Pentecostalism 6 (1986, p. 6).

Busco conjectures, however, that she could not imagine evangelical movements working in settings where there is less female dependency, less sex segregation or a more individualistic orientation. However, American researchers have found some similar patterns among "born again" women in the United States.

Describing the data from their fieldwork among participants in a small, charismatic Christian ministry in the Silicon Valley (Global Ministries of Love), Stacey and Gerard (1988) offer ample evidence of the ways in which the Global's director and many of her followers selectively employ and revise Christian theology in order to reform and strengthen heterosexual marriages, as well as to forge a variety of viable alternatives to nuclear family life. Describing the marriage ceremony of one of the participants studied, they write of the Pastor's directives during the ceremony: "A ring is not a shackle, and marriage is not a relationship of domination, but of equality" (1988, p. 17). And later he admonishes the husband when he states : "...You are the head of the household....and therefore, you have the larger responsibility, but that has nothing to do with dominating a wife" (1988, p. 17).

Patrick McNamara (1985) reveals similar views about the gender relationships among evangelicals when he reviews the pastoral as opposed to the polemical evangelical literature.

Specifically, he points to the less cited work of Beverley and Tim LaHaye. Quoting from their co-authored book, Spirit-Controlled Family Living, and specifically from Tim LaHaye's chapter on "The Roles of the Husband", McNamara notes some interesting qualifications on the issue of headship in the family. While in fact the husband still has the obligation to assume the role of the leader in the home, he must also come to decisionmaking after hearing and evaluating the wife's viewpoint and not without scrutinizing his own motivations. McNamara points to LaHaye's proposition that spouses use a negotiatory process in settling differences between themselves. LaHaye recommends prayer as one source of resolution. Prayer and reading scriptures become an intervening step in the decisionmaking process. In fact, the LaHaye's definition of the husband as ---unselfish, gracious, trusting, sincere, polite, generous, humble, kind and patient--resonates with values long associated with femininity and the female. Antagonisms between the sexes are not expected to be settled simply or solely according to gender hierarchy, but according to implicit cultural rules embedded in religious practice.

In her investigation of Southside Gospel Church, Nancy Ammerman notes that fundamentalist men do not have the power to unilaterally impose their authority on women. She, too, notes that decisionmaking is made by talking it over, and

arriving at a consensus "believed to be God's will" (1988, p. 139). She characterizes women as both powerful and powerless in fundamentalist families, noting that while they may adhere to a strict gender hierarchy they also have "enormous powers of persuasion" (1988, p. 139).

In Women of The New Right, Rebecca Klatch distinguishes between two constituencies among Right-Wing women: social conservatives and laissez-faire conservatives. The social conservative group is rooted in religious belief and considers the family the key and sacred unit of society; the laissez-faire constituency goes back to the classical liberalism of the 19th century which believed that the rational, self-interested individual is the primary element of society.

Not without some irony, Klatch notes that while laissez-faire conservative women actually support part of the feminist agenda⁷ by eschewing social conservatives' views of male authority, female submissiveness or women's "natural" orientation toward others, they do not recognize their collective interests as women. On the other hand, argues Klatch, social conservatives, like many ba'alot t'shuva, act to protect their interests as women, wives, and mothers within traditional patriarchal boundaries. Gender identity is central to these social conservatives' political involvement.

No fault divorce laws...have liberated many men from the obligation to support their wives and children. Women placed in these unfortunate circumstances are touted by the feminist movement as its most valiant "heroines". However, it is the feminist movement's strident insistence on eradication of all sex-related distinctions that has contributed so greatly to the present predicament of divorced women with children who must support the family unit alone (a pro-family activist cited in Klatch, 1987, p. 138)

All I can see is women with careers who then have to come home and clean their house, so all day Saturday or Sunday they are doing housework. All I see is women taking on men's roles, but not men helping. On one side of the feminists's mouth they call for universal daycare, and on the other they say, "Don't worry. Men will help." But I dont's see men helping (another pro-family activist cited in Klatch, 1987, p. 138).

Now while the argument seems to be made against feminists and feminism, what belies that argument is a fundamental distrust of men. Wary of men's morality and of feminism when it seemingly supports men's irresponsibility, Mrs. Billy Graham notes that the women's liberation movement is "turning into men's liberation because we are freeing them from their responsibilities. I think we are being taken for a ride" (cited in Klatch, 1987, p. 137). Phyllis Schlafly sums it up:

Consider a wife in her 50's whose husband decides he wants to divorce her and trade her in on a younger model...If ERA is ratified, and thereby wipes out the state laws that require a husband to support his wife, the cast off wife will have to hunt for a job to support herself...The most tragic effect of ERA would thus fall on the woman who has been a good wife and homemaker for decades..."(cited in Klatch, 1987, p. 137)8.

For many women, it is precisely in the area of personal relationships that organized religion has the most effect. In fact, it is in the area of personal relations, particularly in the context of the family and household, where vigorous legislative reforms aimed at promoting gender equality often fail to bring about real changes in male and female status and, most particularly, in the role behavior of men. Both evangelicalism and orthodoxy have strict codes of behavior for men as well as women. These women often claim that aggression, violence, pride, self-indulgence and an individualistic orientation (often equated in a secular context with masculinity) is replaced in the religious world with humility, self restraint, and a collective orientation and identification with the church/synagogue and the home. It is the effective use of what Stacey (1988) calls "patriarchal profamilianism" that women seem to find organized religion so responsive. For these women, profamilianism allows the family to be at the center of both men's and women's lives.

Despite many "born again" women's distrust of feminism, their focus on raising women's status, promoting female interests, and altering gender-role behavior of men as fathers and husbands resonate with many issues long of concern to feminists. In fact, "postfeminist" is the term Judith Stacey uses to describe the gender consciousness and

the family and work strategies many "born again" women use (1987). For Rosenfelt and Stacey (1987), rather than suggesting that feminism is dead, postfeminism describes the ways many women, even religious right women (Stacey, 1987; Stacey and Gerard, 1988), incorporate, revise, adapt and depoliticize many of the central goals of feminism. It describes the consciousness and strategies increasing numbers of women have developed in response to the new difficulties and opportunities of familial and work life in the latter half of the twentieth century.

We are left, it appears to me with the following question posed by Stacey (1987): Is it possible to devise a personal politics that respects the political and personal anxieties of women contending with the destabilized family and work conditions of contemporary America, without succumbing to conservative nostalgia for patriarchal familial and religious forms? We have come, then, full circle to the paradox with which I began. We have returned to the paradox posed by Willis's description of the "rebbetzin". Are these religious right women outrightly antifeminist? Are they postfeminists? Perhaps the terms we use to characterize these women are less important than the challenge to feminism this kind of depoliticized feminism represents. I believe we must dig deep into our feminist tradition (itself a byproduct of patriarchy) to answer that challenge. But that exploration is for another paper.

Footnotes

1 The five cities include: Boston, Cleveland, New York City (including Crown Heights), Los Angeles, and San Francisco. The choice to interview in these cities was based on several considerations. According to the 1985 Jewish Yearbook statistics all five cities are cities wherein there is a recognizable orthodox Jewish population (ranging from 5% (Los Angeles) to 13% (New York City) claiming orthodox affiliation). Interviewing also occurred in cities where I had Jewish communal contacts who could help me map the orthodox communities, provide contacts, and where there were known ba'alot t'shuva. Finally, this was not a study of Orthodox Judaism nor of orthodox communities but rather of newly orthodox Jews.

2 For a fuller discussion of second wave feminism and the ba'alot t'shuva see Kaufman 1985a; 1985b; 1987.

3 Others have distinguished between feminism and female consciousness by arguing that "true feminism" does not value social cohesion over individual rights nor the quality of life over access to power. Molyneux distinguishes between "practical and "strategic" goals in distinguishing among feminists. The latter referring to long term revolutionary

goals, such as the total revision of the sex/gender system; the former referring to specific and short term goals such as consumer boycotting.

4 It is generally agreed that it was women not men who extended the period of nidda from seven to twelve days (adding to the minimum of a five day menstrual flow another seven "clean" or "white" days before the resumption of sexual intercourse (See, Biale, 1984).

5 According to leading studies of the 1980s, 2 million married women in America, one in seven, are raped by their husbands each year. Twice as many women are raped by their husbands than by strangers.

6 Brusco defends the interchangeable use of Pentecostalism, evangelical Protestantism, and fundamentalism because she claims that the process she is discussing seems to prevail in each of these denominational groupings despite their differences.

7 This may explain some of the findings Carol Pohli reports (1983) in her provocative article about Evangelical women. She suggests that the women may not be as conservative as the male spokesmen for the Christian New Right.

8 See Wietzman, Lenore (1985) on no-fault divorce for some corroboration of these New Right women's fears.

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