

# MODERN ORTHODOX JUDAISM AS AN OPTION FOR PROFESSIONAL WOMEN

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*Modern Orthodox professional women coexist in the secular and religious worlds and they must balance their extensive responsibilities in those two arenas. Through observance of Shabbat and the holidays, these women regularly make time for a rich family life. The crossover of secular values, such as feminism, into the religious world has led many to explore innovative public religious experiences, such as women's tefillah groups.*

This article examines how professional, modern Orthodox Jewish women reconcile the religious and professional components of their lives. Through in-depth discussions with eleven modern Orthodox women belonging to two neighboring synagogues in the United States, I explored their religious practices and beliefs, their reasons for living a modern Orthodox life, and the most salient values of their religious and secular worlds.

To put the interview material in its proper context, I briefly outline the traditional role of women in Orthodoxy, the distinction between modern Orthodox Judaism and traditional Judaism, and the influences and impact of feminism and modernity on the traditional role. The final section discusses the interview material, which encompasses a description of the synagogue settings and the respondents, a summary of the respondents' reasons for choosing a modern Orthodox life, a description of how they balance and juggle their responsibilities in these two worlds, and a discussion of their views of feminism and public opportunities for religious expression or lack thereof within modern Orthodox Judaism.

This article attempts to provide Jewish communal professionals with a better understanding of modern Orthodox, professional women and the conflicts between modern Orthodox Judaism and feminism. Through their heightened understanding, the Jewish community can be more responsive to this important segment of the American Jewish population. Furthermore,

this article is helpful to professional Jewish women who want to explore Orthodoxy; it demonstrates the possibility of coexisting and achieving a level of comfort in both these worlds.

## THE TRADITIONAL ROLE OF WOMEN IN ORTHODOXY

In traditional Orthodox Judaism, women and men do not have identical educations, identical roles, or equal visibility in public (Aiken, 1993). Historically, in traditional, Torah-observant Judaism, numerous subgroups each had special roles. For example, priests served God in the Temple and taught Torah, and the Levites sang praises to God and played musical instruments in the Temple. Neither of these groups was allowed to perform the responsibilities of the other. Similarly, women have a number of unique and special duties in Torah-observant Judaism. According to Lisa Aiken (1993, p. 30), "A plurality of roles allows each group of Jews to make its special contribution that will allow the Jewish nation to properly serve God."

Two overarching explanations from traditional Jewish sources account for the differences in men and women's roles in Orthodox Judaism. First, both men and women are obligated to follow God's plan and imitate God by uniting through acts of giving and lovingkindness (Aiken, 1993). Each, however, is required to imitate God in a different way, as is discussed below. Second, women are designated the more

private roles, and men are given the more public roles, even though neither gender is restricted to either area. Both should strive for privacy because in Judaism spiritual heroism takes place in private, but women should cultivate a private relationship with God as a primary value and men should do this as a secondary goal (Aiken, 1993). The root of the female's role as a private one is the verse, "The entire glory of the daughter of the king lies on the inside (Psalm 45:14)."

In Orthodox Judaism, the *mitzvot* (divine commandments) that men and women observe are necessary to sanctify the world. Women are exempt from the time-bound *mitzvot*, which include reciting the *Shema*, donning *tefillin*, wearing *tzitzit* (fringes), counting the *Omer*, hearing the *shofar*, dwelling in the *sukkah*, and taking the *lulav*. With the exception of *tefillin*, however, a woman may perform these commandments. The Talmud states that the exemption does not signify that men have greater worth than women, but rather both are equally sacred (Meiselman, 1978). Most authorities view these exemptions as an accepted part of *Halachah* (Jewish law). Others have attributed the exemption to inherent differences in men and women; women have the innate ability to reach spirituality, in contrast to men whose aggression inhibits this attainment and therefore necessitates their performance of additional commandments (Meiselman, 1978, pp. 43-44).

Three special *mitzvot* are the exclusive domain of women: (1) the laws of *taharat hamishpachah* (family purity); (2) the separation of a piece of dough when baking bread; and (3) the lighting of the Sabbath candles (Aiken, 1993). These acts raise details of daily life to a level of holiness. Through the laws of *taharat hamishpachah*, sexual relations between a husband and a wife are made holy. Setting aside a piece of challah that is baked in honor of the Sabbath is a way of demonstrating to family members that material blessings come from God and their ultimate purpose is to serve

God (Aiken, 1993). The final *mitzvah*, candle lighting, sanctifies time. The Sabbath candles are lit 18 minutes before sunset on a Friday to take time from the secular day to add it to the Sabbath. By adding more spiritual time to the Sabbath, women demonstrate that every moment of time and human existence is significant and that it is within our human potential to sanctify time (Aiken, 1993).

In Orthodox Judaism, women are responsible for imitating God in two ways—by creating new life and nurturing others. According to Rabbi Moshe Meiselman (1978, p. 16), "The Jewish woman is the creator, molder, and guardian of the Jewish home. The family has always been the unit of Jewish existence, and while the man has always been the family's public representative, the woman has been its soul." The center of Jewish life has always been the home, and not the synagogue. As the soul of a Jewish home, the woman has the primary responsibility for transmitting Jewish belief and practice to her children, teaching them to know and love God and bringing the concepts of God to life for them. The woman infuses the physical aspects of providing for the needs of her family with spirituality by providing the proper religious environment for all members of her family (Meiselman, 1978). In his eulogy for the Talne Rebbitzin Rebecca Twersky *zt'l*, the late talmudic scholar Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik *zt'l* describes how and what his mother taught him as the soul of his family's home:

I used to watch her arranging the house in honor of a holiday. I used to see her recite prayers: I used to watch her recite the *sidra* (the Torah portion of the week) every Friday night and I still remember the nostalgic tune. I learned from her very much.

Most of all I learned that Judaism expresses itself not only in formal compliance with the law but also in a living experience. She taught me that there is a flavor, a scent and warmth to *mitzvot*. I

learned from her the most important thing in life—to feel the presence of the Almighty and the gentle pressure of His hand resting upon my frail shoulders. Without her teachings, which quite often were transmitted to me in silence, I would have grown up a soulless being, dry and insensitive (Soloveitchik, 1977, p. 77).

Familial responsibilities and women's ultimate responsibility for ensuring the continuity of the Jewish people are yet a third explanation for women's exemptions from time-bound commandments (Aiken, 1993).

Within Orthodox communities, in order to serve God properly, men and women must focus on developing their inner selves by dressing and acting modestly so as to present themselves with dignity to the rest of the world (Aiken, 1993). Modesty extends to behavior as well. In Orthodox Judaism, there is a reciprocal requirement for men and women to refrain from behaving in a sexually suggestive manner. This is the reason women are not permitted to sing before men other than their husbands.

In contemporary society, women occupy a range of professions, which religiously they are *not* prohibited from occupying. In keeping with the laws of modesty, however, they (and men, as well) must uphold the Jewish standards of morality and ethics. Both men and women are discouraged from assuming positions where prestige is a prerequisite of the job (Aiken, 1993).

In rabbinic Judaism, men and women have different roles in prayer, although both are equally obligated to pray to connect with God, and their prayer is equally accepted by God (Meiselman, 1978). Twice a day, women are required to pray the *Shemoneh Esrai*, the central daily prayers, and are encouraged to say the *Shema*. When they cannot do this, they should strive to pray in some form every day. Although a woman can participate in communal, public prayer, she is not obligated to do so. If a woman were required to say the morning prayers, she might be hindered from performing her

role of assessing and meeting the needs of her children in the morning and developing her internal role (Aiken, 1993). Since she is not required to develop the area of public responsibility, she cannot be counted as one of the ten comprising the basic prayer unit, a *minyan*, and cannot lead public prayer (Meiselman, 1978). Recent Jewish literature on Jewish law states that "a *minyan* is made up of ten people who share the same degree of obligation (quoted in Meiselman, 1978, p. 138)," and this applies to non-gender issues as well.

Part of communal prayer includes the Torah reading, and in traditional Judaism women are excluded from having an *aliyah* (being called to the Torah). The reasoning behind this exclusion is twofold. First, a person who is praying is required to focus only on the prayer and should avoid anything that might make him or her feel self-conscious: "One must be able to lose himself totally in prayer" (Meiselman, 1978, p. 142). Sexual distraction is considered to inhibit prayer and is one of the explanations for separate seating in Orthodox synagogues. In addition, according to Meiselman (1978), men feel more self-conscious in the presence of women than in the presence of men. Second, women have less of an obligation than men in Torah reading; they are not required to attend synagogue and listen to the communal Torah reading. Although women cannot constitute a part of a *minyan* and cannot be called to the Torah, the paradigm of how a Jew should pray is the biblical Hannah: "And Hannah talked [to God] of what was in her heart, only her lips moved and her voice was not heard (1 Samuel 1:13)." Both men and women use Hannah's example as a model of prayer.

#### THE DEFINITION OF MODERN ORTHODOX JUDAISM AND THE INFLUENCES OF MODERNITY AND FEMINISM ON MODERN ORTHODOXY

Orthodox Judaism in America is not homogeneous; within Orthodoxy lie a range of subgroups, such as the *Hasidim*, *Haredi*,

and modern Orthodox. Even within modern Orthodoxy lie different perspectives and subgroups, as this article shows. Traditional Orthodox Judaism, which includes the *Hasidim* and *Haredim*, values the status quo and remains insulated from contemporary culture, but is not completely unaffected by life on the outside (Heilman & Cohen, 1989). Traditional Jews look toward religious authority to determine what should be done and how one should live one's life.

In contrast, modern Orthodox Jews are attached to contemporary life and culture with its future orientation and focus on change. They are also, however, bonded to the traditional past. They exist simultaneously in the parochial world of Orthodoxy and the cosmopolitan world of America, and they tend to achieve this coexistence by synthesizing or compartmentalizing their lives (Heilman & Cohen, 1989). Although permissiveness is not part of the modern Orthodox philosophy, individuals tend to be more lenient in their religious practices, although less so than non-Orthodox Jews, and are less concerned with asking the rabbi about what Judaism demands of them, but rather define it for themselves. To a degree they are ambivalent about the major tenets of Orthodoxy (Heilman & Cohen, 1989).

Given that modern Orthodox Jews coexist in the secular and the traditional Jewish worlds, the crossover of values from one to the other is inevitable. As mentioned above even the traditionalists are affected by life in the outside world. Indeed, according to Sylvia Barack Fishman (1993, p. 160), in most American Jewish communities, the majority of Orthodox women under the age of 50 have attained college degrees and are employed outside the home. Lynn Davidman (1990), in her comparison of methods of outreach of two contemporary Orthodox groups, discusses several values of modernity—pluralism and individualism, rationalization, and changing women's roles—that have been particularly problematic for religion. Pluralism and individualism represent the overabundance of choices of ways

of life available in modern society and the emphasis on self-fulfillment as the enduring principle for choosing a lifestyle (Davidman, 1990). Individualism conflicts with religion since it focuses on the self over obligations to community and tradition. Regarding rationalization, modern individuals are too pragmatically oriented to grasp such other-worldly religious conceptions as God. The modern Orthodox rabbis in Davidman's study (1990) on the one hand describe God in traditional terms, such as the "source of life" and the "final authority," and on the other hand assert that a traditional way of life is meaningful without belief in God. Lastly, changing women's roles in the modern world conflict with Orthodox Judaism, which excludes women from public roles and stresses their duties as wives and mothers: "In a society in which women have increased opportunities and options, and in which feminist critiques of established religious roles are widely available, religious communities that wish to attract or retain modern women must find ways of addressing these issues" (Davidman, 1990, p. 39-40).

The inevitable crossover of values between the secular and the Orthodox worlds has been examined in several studies. Debra Renee Kaufman in her study of *baalot tshuvah* (women who have returned to Orthodoxy) found that they minimized the importance of feminism in their lives, but used feminist rhetoric to describe their Orthodox lives, specifically regarding the laws of *taharat hamishpachah*. The women she interviewed viewed these laws as "giving structure, regulation, and control to them over their sexuality (Kaufman, 1991, p. 9)." In Naomi Marmon's study of *taharat hamishpachah*, the Orthodox women viewed the role differentiation in Judaism between men and women as positive because it allowed women to be valued in their own right, rather than in competition with men. According to one woman, "Judaism gives women their own unique way to contribute to the world, and we don't have to imitate men to gain stature in this system

(Marmon, 1993, p. 49)."

In addition, Marmon found that the modern value of free choice, the right to choose among the available options, was embraced by some of the Orthodox women in her study. Some did not observe those laws of *taharat hamishpachah* that made them uncomfortable as their way of coping with the struggle between modern values and tradition.

The influences of feminism and modernity have resulted in new religious opportunities for modern Orthodox women, such as women's *tefillah* groups, dancing with the Torah scroll during their own *hakafot* (processions with the Torah) on the holiday of Simchas Torah, Bat Mitzvah ceremonies within the context of a *tefillah* group, *Dvrei Torah* (talks on religious texts) given by women at the women's *tefillah* services and at the conclusion of Sabbath morning services, and the public recitation of the *Gomel* prayer, given in thanks for the deliverance from a potentially dangerous situation, such as childbirth. According to Fishman (1993, p. 159), "Orthodox feminists believe deeply both in the authority of Jewish law and in expanding and enhancing opportunities for spiritual expression for women, on the other hand."

Women's *tefillah* groups are a case in point. They provide women with opportunities to lead *davening* (praying), read from the Torah, and pray among women only. The participants emphasize that the group is not a women's *minyan*; unlike a group of ten men in Orthodox Judaism, they recognize that a group of ten women does not hold Halachic status. In the absence of a *minyan*, many will not recite the 20 percent of the prayer service reserved for a quorum of ten men (Fishman, 1993, p. 158); rather, they recite those prayers that they would be allowed to recite in private.

Although Rabbi Avi Weiss (1990) has written a book exploring the halachic justification for women's *tefillah* groups, they are not universally accepted in Orthodox circles. According to one modern Orthodox rabbi, only a small number of Orthodox

synagogues today have women's *tefillah* groups. Although in the mid-1970s certain religious authorities condoned these prayer groups, provided that they followed the same rules that apply to women praying individually, many rabbis came to see them as responses to secular feminism and not based in a desire to pray more intensely as a Jew. Based on the principle in Judaism that prohibits Jews from imitating Gentile ways, these prayer groups were forbidden because they were incorporating the secular philosophy of feminism (Aiken, 1993). Another criticism that has been leveled against women's *tefillah* groups is that they introduce a new practice in synagogue custom. The same modern Orthodox rabbi relates that there has been a strong reluctance to change anything related to synagogue customs throughout Jewish history.

A third criticism of the women's *tefillah* groups is that its proponents should defer to the *Gedolei Torah* (the greats of the Torah) of our day to assess their validity. Through history to the present day, these men have addressed the issues that affect the Jewish nation as a whole and have charted the most appropriate path for the Jewish people in Halachah. Rabbi Reuven Drucker (1987, p. 38) contends that "a matter of such magnitude is beyond the scope of any one synagogue rabbi and should be recognized as such. Such an issue needs to be referred to and reviewed by the framers of the Mesorah [tradition] in our day." For each of the arguments, however, Rabbi Avi Weiss (1990) presents counterarguments; for example, he provides examples of how rabbinic authorities have responded to different phenomena that have arisen throughout history using the Halachic process and notes that certain esteemed Jewish scholars have never categorically rejected the women's *tefillah* groups. In fact, in 1984, five rabbis on the faculty of Yeshiva University, who are considered *Gedolei Torah*, wrote an opinion on the issue, concluding that "separate *hakafot* for women on Simchas Torah, and separate gatherings, '*minyanim*' of women for prayer [and] for reading...the Torah, are prohibited

according to Jewish law (quoted in Weiss, 1990, pp. xv-xvi)."

There is obvious disagreement within the Orthodox community as to the validity of women's *tefillah* groups. This is reflected in the two modern Orthodox synagogue settings chosen for the study reported in this article. One condones women's *tefillah* groups, whereas the other does not. These two settings are near each other, so members have the option to attend one or the other. The respondents' choices provide interesting insights into how these women have reconciled the two worlds in which they live—the secular and the religious.

### THE INTERVIEW MATERIAL

#### The Religious Identities of the Respondents and the Synagogue Settings

##### *The Respondents*

The women in this study were chosen from two synagogues in a major city in the north-eastern United States, Congregation Beit Tzion and Congregation Ahavath Shalom.<sup>1</sup> Through discussions with the rabbis and members of the synagogues, I collected names of professional women who were believed to be committed to modern Orthodox Judaism. The choices of professional modern Orthodox women at Congregation Beit Tzion were more limited. From the set of names, I chose a group of women from each synagogue who were representative of a range of demanding professions, such as law, medicine, and academia. My goal was to schedule ten interviews, five from each synagogue. Almost all the women with whom I spoke were interested in the project and agreed to meet with me.

Congregation Beit Tzion has a membership of 230 families, whereas Congregation Ahavath Shalom has a membership of 120 families. The two synagogues are within short walking distance of one another, and there is an overlap in membership—some

families belong to both synagogues. Often on a Sabbath morning, members of both synagogues will spend some time at each. Of the three respondents who belonged to both, one was counted as a member of Congregation Beit Tzion, and two were counted as members of Congregation Ahavath Shalom based on which synagogue they were more committed to at the time of the interview. In total, five members of Congregation Beit Tzion and six members of Congregation Ahavath Shalom were interviewed.

All the interviewees are married and between the ages of 32 and 56. Ten of the women have between two and six children. They all work either part- or full-time in demanding professions; four are professors, three are physicians, two are lawyers, one is an engineer, and one is a researcher. All are well educated, and with one exception, all have either graduate or professional degrees. Their husbands all work in professions or careers that entail spending 40 to 70 hours at work per week. All have some form of domestic help, such as full-time nannies or part-time housekeepers. The household responsibilities of child care, cooking, grocery shopping, cleaning, and finances are divided among the husbands, wives, and outside helpers.

##### *Modern Orthodox Practices*

Nine of the eleven women are committed, practicing modern Orthodox Jews in that they regularly observe the Sabbath, keep strictly kosher inside their homes, visit (or had visited pre-menopause) the *mikvah* every month, and are committed to an Orthodox educational experience for their children. One woman does all of these practices, but characterizes herself as Orthodox and not modern Orthodox. One woman from Congregation Ahavath Shalom is considerably less observant. She does not visit the *mikvah*, is not strict about observing the Sabbath, brings some non-kosher *pareve* or dairy foods into her home, and sends her children to Conservative day school.

In addition, the level of *kashrut* outside

<sup>1</sup>The names of the synagogues and the interviewees are pseudonyms.

their homes varies. None of the members of Ahavath Shalom cover their hair, whereas two of the members of Beit Tzion do so. Of the members of Beit Tzion, two of five were raised as practicing modern Orthodox, two were raised Conservative, and one was raised with a mixed Reform and non-Jewish background. Of the members of Ahavath Shalom, three were raised as practicing modern Orthodox, one grew up affiliated with a modern Orthodox synagogue but was non-practicing, and two were raised Conservative.

#### *Belief in God*

The women did not give a uniform, singular explanation for their belief in God. One of the women declined to respond to the question. The remaining women all expressed a belief in God, but their explanations differed and can be grouped into six areas: (1) belief based on connectedness to God through practices, (2) belief in an all-powerful force, (3) belief in a centralizing force, (4) belief that God has a plan for how Jewish people should behave, (5) belief that God provides a sense of morality, and (6) belief shaped by parents' experiences as Holocaust survivors. Three of the women described their belief as being most profound when they perform religious practices.

Whether these women grew up as Orthodox is one key factor that explains their patterns of belief and practice. Yael believes that since she has grown up with Orthodoxy, she accepts certain of its aspects, such as belief in God, as givens and has not had to question them. She explains that questioning is natural for *baalei tshuvah* (people who have returned to Orthodoxy). Interestingly, Shoshana, who did not have an Orthodox upbringing, admitted that she observes the rituals because they work for her and her family, but does not know how she feels about God nor what she believes in terms of the origin of the rituals. For some of these women, their connectedness to God varies on a day-to-day basis and depends on

whether they are engaging in religious practices. The belief of others is characterized by greater constancy or by a pervasiveness of God in their daily actions and experiences.

#### *The Synagogue Settings*

The two synagogues have fundamental differences in how they provide for the religious expression for women. At Congregation Beit Tzion the full-time rabbi sets the religious tone of the synagogue. On the modern Orthodox spectrum, the rabbi is traditional in his approach to how and what can be done in the synagogue. He believes that women should take the more private role in religious life as prescribed by Halachah and objects to more public expressions for women, such as the women's *tefillah* group. He questions whether these are motivated by feminist needs to engage in practices that have traditionally been reserved for men or by a striving for greater spirituality. He also views the groups as deviating from traditional synagogue ritual.

Congregation Ahavath Shalom has a part-time rabbi. At this synagogue, the members largely set the tone, but seek guidance on Halachic issues from the rabbi. The membership is described as religiously homogeneous since a majority grew up with Orthodox day school educations. Approximately 30 adult women out of 100 participate in a monthly women's *tefillah* service for *Mincha* (the afternoon service) on the Sabbath before *Rosh Chodesh* (the new month). In addition, both men and women give *Dvrei Torah* on Sabbath mornings from the *bimah* (altar).

#### **Why Have These Women Chosen to Lead a Modern Orthodox Life?**

##### *Modern Orthodox and Not Conservative or Traditional Orthodox*

As mentioned above, the respondents came from varied Jewish backgrounds. Some grew up in Orthodoxy, and others came to it on their own or together with their hus-

bands. They pursue a modern Orthodox and not a Conservative or more traditional Orthodox path for a variety of reasons. Several respondents value modern Orthodoxy because it combines the religious and the secular worlds and it provides girls with equal educational opportunities.

For some, modern Orthodoxy represents a community with a consistent lifestyle. According to Sarah, "If you want to be a Sabbath observer, you really only have the Orthodox world to deal with, and that's what I mean by community." Yaffa does not agree with the "picking and choosing" of observances in Conservative settings. Yehudit, who comes from a Conservative background, had a yearning for *Yiddishkeit* that she did not find in Conservative Judaism. She says, "I didn't approach finding modern Orthodoxy through a *yeshivah* education and belief in God. It was more based in situating myself in a tradition....For me it is a lifestyle choice, rather than a choice based on a dynamic belief." Only Miriam described herself as Orthodox and not modern Orthodox. She believes in a *masoret* (tradition) handed down through the generations, which has been the only thing that has kept us alive as Jews.

#### *Family, the Sabbath, and Other Values*

Ten of the eleven women interviewed said that, of all Jewish practices, they most value or look forward to observing the Sabbath. Some talked about it as an opportunity for uninterrupted family time. Shoshana views it as "25 hours of kid time." Yael looks forward to Shabbas as an opportunity to spend time with her family after carpooling all week long. "Shabbas," she says, "sets a specific time that is unmovable. It's a time for religious life and a time for family life." Others look at it as a rest day after a long week of work. Sima says, "Shabbas is a wonderful perk. The whole day—going to shul, the social aspect, the way it shapes my week—makes me feel peaceful." According to Shira, "Shabbas is the most wonderful day of the week. It's the one time when you

close out everything. It's almost like meditation and relaxation. [Before Shabbas,] you are rushing to get done, to get everything finished. Then there's peace."

The commitment to children and their education within Orthodoxy was another value that was discussed. Yehudit described how she and her husband are creating an atmosphere in their home where Jewish learning is a part of daily life. They have a commitment to set aside time for her husband to learn with their children outside of school. She says doing so introduces them to Jewish learning in a more personal way than in school. Mia feels that serious and self-disciplined study offered to boys and girls through Orthodox Judaism is part of its sound value system. Hannah discusses lifelong learning, "being engaged in expanding our minds," as the most significant Jewish value that does not exist in secular society.

Another value emphasized by these women was the pervasiveness of a modern Orthodox lifestyle. According to Shira, "Modern Orthodoxy is a seven-day-a-week, 24-hour-a-day experience. It is as much a lifestyle as a religion. It is a culture, not only a belief."

Although several of the women acknowledged that they know many materialistic Orthodox Jews, two of the women valued modern Orthodoxy because it presents an alternative to the materialism of the secular world.

Several of the women talked about modern Orthodoxy as a beautiful way of life. According to Yael, "There is something lovely for me and my kids to be connected to a rich tradition rooted in a community." Miriam discussed how Orthodox Judaism possesses extraordinary beauty, and the rhythm of Jewish life has so much richness. For her, the Jewish response to death through *shiva* (the seven-day period of mourning following a burial) and the laws of *taharat hamishpachah* exemplify this beauty. In addition, other values were mentioned as being important, such as giving *tzedakah* (charity) and maintaining *shalom*



*bayit* (a peaceful home).

Although these women emphasize the rich values of Orthodox Judaism, they also talk about their doubts and difficulties. Miriam says there are two sides to observances, the spiritual side and the "other" side. According to Yael, being kosher never seemed spiritual to her, and the *mikvah* has seemed outdated, based on ancient practices and associated with the notion of the woman being "impure." Yet she still observes these practices.

### THE BALANCING ACT

The lives of these women are replete with the richness of a religious Jewish life and professional fulfillment in the secular world. How, then, do they balance, juggle, and manage?

One option is suggested by Sylvia Barach Fishman (1993, p. 161): "Substantial numbers of Orthodox women seem to compartmentalize the nontraditional aspects of their lives from their traditional roles." In a discussion of holiday and Shabbas preparation, this was readily apparent. One woman uses vacation days to prepare for Rosh Hashanah and Passover, and even to deliver *shalach manos* (the sending out of food) with her children for Purim. Other women similarly budget and block off their time.

Four of the eleven women worked part-time, which facilitates balancing the different facets of their lives. Some of the women who work full-time discussed the flexible nature of their professions. Hannah, for example, is a professor and can choose her own schedule. Others rely on the help of their husbands, housekeepers, and children. According to Mia who works full-time and has a long commute, "The only way we have Shabbas is because my husband goes to the bakery and the butcher, [cooks], and hooks up the hot plate." Miriam, Sarah, and Yehudit all parcel out different responsibilities to their children. Yehudit posts assignments for her children, which she feels has the added benefit of drawing boys into the women's role of preparing for

Shabbas.

Although they find ways to organize their lives and manage, balancing their lives in dual worlds is not without its trials and sacrifices. For example, Yaffa's medical field is so demanding that she will often be late on Friday afternoons and will have to do rounds at the hospital on the Sabbath that she is on call. For Yael, being a Sabbath observer has limited her career by delineating an uncrossable boundary for her family and her work. She has refused requests to fly across the country or attend workshops on Saturdays. She leaves work on Friday afternoon, even if she is in the middle of something critical. Yet, observing the Sabbath has put limits on the importance she has placed on her professional life. She says: "Sometimes I have been angry that it has limited my work; other times I have been happy that it has contained my work. On balance I am happy with things. The values of modern Orthodoxy have absolutely given me the ability to step away from the demands of my professional life to focus on family values.

The biggest issue for Shoshana has been the work-home balance. As an observant Jew, the demands of her home life have cut into her work life in two ways—she has responsibilities to care for her children, which sometimes involve attending to a sick child, and she has a commitment to observe the Sabbath and other holidays. She has had an unfavorable reaction at work when one of her children is sick. Any flexibility on her behalf by her employer sets a precedent. Overall, she has had a hard time reconciling her job with child rearing and being a Sabbath observer. In the words of Mia, whose life is filled to capacity with the demands of her job and the responsibilities of her family, and was perhaps the most stressed of the women I interviewed, "I am a prisoner of time."

### TRADITIONAL ROLES, FEMINISM, AND THE WOMEN'S TEFILLAH GROUP

The group of women interviewed embody multiple approaches to Jewish observances

and religious expression. On the more traditional end of the spectrum, two respondents from Congregation Beit Tzion fully accept the prescribed traditional roles and reject the feminist message of equal capacity between genders. They believe in inherent differences between men and women, which are validated by the traditional role differentiation in Orthodox Judaism. Neither Yona nor Miriam opt to participate in the women's *tefillah* group; rather they are contented with traditional modes of prayer.

On the other end of the spectrum are members of Congregation Ahavath Shalom who are strong advocates of the women's *tefillah* group and other public opportunities for religious expression. They believe in the feminist philosophy that men and women have equal capacity. Mia, for example, says all the secular feminist values, such as equal capacity of the sexes, have influenced her approach to modern Orthodox Judaism and are manifested in her participation in the women's *tefillah* group. Similarly, Sarah believes women should think about their goals and aspirations and have a moral obligation to achieve these goals. She comments that the women's *tefillah* group gives women a regular opportunity to worship together and sing together. She recalls that the women were hesitant at first before they sang out loud, and how many grandmothers wept when they first looked into a Torah because they had not realized how deprived they felt.

These women defend their right to have these opportunities for public religious expression and are angered by those who criticize their endeavors. Sarah says, "I am most agitated by the unwillingness of some rabbis and lay persons to evaluate issues honestly from a genuinely Halachic point of view...and when people are outraged by the level of woman's participation at [Congregation Ahavath Shalom]." Likewise, some women are upset by restrictions imposed on the women's service.

In the middle of the spectrum lie a variety of views. For example, Yael, a member of both synagogues, espouses the belief that

women have different voices than men, rejects the women's *tefillah* service, but accepts other forms of public religious expression. For Yael, her public domain is her work domain where she is equally represented, and this tempers her need for public expression within Judaism.

Two members of Congregation Beit Tzion are strong feminists and to a limited extent partake in public opportunities for religious expression. Both Sima and Shoshana believe that men and women have equal capacities, and both are bothered by the absence of public roles for women in Orthodox Judaism. Sima believes there is something unequal about women's exemptions from time-bound commandments, but at times she is grateful for the exemption. Shoshana too is ambivalent about her synagogue role. She would like to find a way to be more involved in synagogue ritual, but right now she does not know what she would do about it.

Shoshana and her husband have chosen to model behavior for children outside of the traditional roles. In private, she encourages her daughter to say the *Motzeh* (the blessing for bread, traditionally said by men) because she wants her to have that skill. Her husband takes care of the children in *shul* on Shabbas morning, even though he is required to *daven*. She wants her children to see her *daven* and not only take care of them.

Finally, two members of Congregation Ahavath Shalom take a traditional approach to their roles in Orthodoxy and do not wish to participate in the women's *tefillah* service. Shira is concerned that that service attracts non-Orthodox women who want to participate, and she fears this can change a synagogue.

## CONCLUSION

This group of professional, modern Orthodox women, with one exception, is committed to a religious core of practices, comprised of keeping kosher inside their homes, visiting the *mikvah*, and observing the Sab-

bath. They successfully manage to build their lives around two seemingly antithetical worlds, the religious and the secular. They choose a modern Orthodox life because it allows them to participate in their ancient religious heritage and the modern world. For some the balancing has been easier than for others.

Although they are committed to a core of practices, a majority are selective about the practices they follow that fall outside of this core. The levels at which they keep kosher outside their homes, and whether they dress modestly and recite the *Shemoneh Esrai* or pray in some form every day vary significantly. Consistent with Heilman and Cohen's definition of modern Orthodoxy, they are permissive in their religious practices, although less so than Conservative Jews, from whom these women consciously stand apart. Indeed, they live an Orthodox life because it provides them with a rich value system and social structure.

Seemingly, their coexistence in the secular and religious worlds prevents them from following completely the traditionally prescribed role. In addition to being selective about their practices, they do not present a uniform explanation of their belief in God. Not all of them have the time to spend arranging their homes in honor of a holiday or the Sabbath. None of them mentioned reciting the *Sidra* on Friday nights, as noted in Rabbi Soloveitchik's memories of his mother. Not all of them draw upon traditional Judaism to guide them in all the fine nuances of their lives. The crossover of secular values, such as feminism, has led many to explore innovative, public religious experiences, such as the women's *tefillah* group. For others, a reinterpretation of feminism has led to the validation of traditional religious roles. Some are still wrestling with the contradictory sets of values from both worlds, whereas others are more settled. (Membership in a particular synagogue did not predict acceptance of public opportunities for religious expression.)

When compared to the ideal of women's traditional roles in Orthodox Judaism, these

women take shortcuts and demonstrate diminished religious behavior. However, this study did not incorporate a control group of traditional Orthodox women, such as *Haredi* women, which would have demonstrated whether that group typically incorporates a more complete set of religious practices.

The findings of this study parallel and contrast with those of Lynn Davidman's (1991) research conducted in 1984, where she interviewed predominantly single, professional women who were becoming interested in modern Orthodox Judaism. The women in her sample, although at different stages in their lives and religious development from the women in this study, were attracted by the emphasis on family and community values. Many of these women, whose contemporaries were already married, decided to explore the synagogue because they longed for families of their own. In addition, the modern Orthodox lifestyle provided an alternative to the confused prescription for women's roles offered by secular society. They had worked for years, competing with men professionally, but had never intended to be "career women." They more uniformly accepted Orthodox gender differentiation than the women in this study, but would strongly object to inequality in the workplace. For these women, the synagogue offered true fulfillment, and they did not want to risk their opportunities for marriage and family by struggling with the system (Davidman, 1991). In contrast, the women in this study had already attained a measure of stability in all the arenas—family, profession, and religion—and some of them challenge openly the traditional tenets of Orthodoxy.

In living an Orthodox Jewish life, the modern Orthodox women in this study feel that they regularly make time for family through meaningful Sabbath experiences that are sacrosanct. In a society where professional achievement is valued and family time is devalued, through Orthodox Judaism, these women establish clear priorities. In a society where stress, anxiety, and ex-

haustion are fundamental components of life, these women have a coping mechanism and a means of restoring sanity to their lives. In a society with confused messages of right and wrong, these women embrace a sound value system.

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