While exceptional non-Jewish men did enter the world of Torah study at key junctures, it is extremely unlikely that Epstein would have been aware of any women having done so. The matter does, however, invite further reflection.

68. For a broader historical and sociological account of these themes in the context of American Jewish education for girls, see Paula Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995).

69. Future study should also work to place the narratives we have discussed in the context of earlier autobiographical chapters. It is interesting to consider, for instance, whether the limited ambivalence that Barukh Epstein expresses toward traditional ideals may relate to the personal ambivalence he himself experienced in earlier chapters concerning his chosen career of banking, and the possibility that it would remove him from the world of sacred study.

EFFORTS AT CHANGE IN A TRADITIONAL DENOMINATION: THE CASE OF ORTHODOX WOMEN'S PRAYER GROUPS*

Ailene Cohen Nusbacher

This paper will discuss emerging trends in Orthodox women's participation in innovative ritual practices. I have had a longstanding interest in how Orthodox Judaism survives in contemporary society, and particularly in the effect of recent socio-cultural trends on Orthodox women. I had been thinking about Orthodox women's passive role in the synagogue when I read about the controversy surrounding an Orthodox women's prayer group in Queens, New York, in the Jewish media. After attending the First International Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy in New York in 1997, I decided to embark on a systematic study of Orthodox women who attend prayer groups.

In the summer of 1997 I conducted an exploratory study of Orthodox women who attend women's prayer groups, using the data collected from 27 in-depth interviews. One of the many goals of the study was to understand why women join these groups, and why the women remain loyal to Orthodox tradition rather than seeking satisfaction of their spiritual needs in more symbolically egalitarian denominations. After a summary of why women join prayer groups and remain Orthodox, I shall focus on the following related issues: whether the women are satisfied with their prayer groups, given the restrictions that limit their services; what changes, if any, they desire to make in their prayer services; their analysis of and feelings about the rabbinic opposition to prayer groups; and, finally, their strategies to effect change. An examination of the women's own words on these issues will illuminate the dilemma Orthodox women face and how they create a social reality with which they can live.

Several factors may account for the formation of women's prayer groups

by Christian and Jewish women over the last twenty-five to thirty years. Beginning in the mid-1960s, more women than ever before completed college and postgraduate degrees, entered high-status professions and participated in the work force. This trend has continued.[1] College education and professional work experience often generate feelings of achievement and ability equivalent to men's in all spheres and lead to the desire for active participation in various institutions. Permissive and relativistic cultural norms that question tradition have become widespread. Individuals seek self-fulfillment at the expense of commitment to group norms.[2] Feminists have critiqued traditional and subordinate roles for women in the family, the work force and religious institutions.[3] At the same time, the quest for spirituality and community has led many Americans to join small Bible study or prayer groups.[4]

Certain developments in the Jewish world seem also to have influenced Orthodox women to form prayer groups. The Jewish feminist movement, which emerged in the early 1970s, initially criticized Judaism as a patriarchal religion that excluded women from leadership roles and active participation in rituals.[5] Orthodox women have been influenced by other Jewish denominations that have eliminated or modified restrictions on women's formal religious participation. It is probably no accident that the first Orthodox women's prayer groups were formed in 1972 and in 1974, the same years that the Reform and Reconstructionist movements ordained the first women rabbis.

In the 1960s, the first Orthodox women to have had intensive religious education through high school and college came of age. A comprehensive religious education enables women to question the halakhic (Jewish law) basis for traditional roles and can contribute to their desire for active participation in rituals from which women have historically been excluded. For all these reasons, the formation of prayer groups may be seen as part of a wider pattern of social and religious change that has affected Orthodox Jewish women.

In Orthodox Judaism, prayer plays a major role in ritual and institutional life. The majority halakhic opinion states that men are required to pray three times a day, preferably in a *minyan* (a quorum of ten men) at a synagogue, while women are required to pray once a day, privately, and not necessarily in the synagogue.[6] Several important parts of the prayer service, including the public reading from the Torah scrolls, can

be performed only in the presence of a *minyan* of men. When women attend synagogue services, mainly on Sabbaths and festivals, they are seated apart from men, and they may not participate actively or lead any portion of the service. From early childhood, boys and girls are socialized to accept this.

The first group of Orthodox women to gather to hold a separate prayer service for the purpose of enhancing women's participation seems to have met in New York City in 1972.[7] Since then over fifty groups have been formed, mainly in the United States but also in other countries. Twenty are located in the New York metropolitan area. Individual prayer groups are loosely organized into the Women's Tefillah Network, an "umbrella" organization that provides information and a forum for discussion. Most groups meet one Saturday morning a month, but many also have services for some of the holidays. The women's *tefillah* groups have ceremonies to celebrate bat mitzvah and baby naming, and for brides. The women actively lead services and read from the Torah scrolls or from a Bible, but since they do not, by their own lights, constitute a *minyan*, they may not perform all aspects of the prayer service.[8]

The women have sought and received the support of a minority of Orthodox rabbis. The rabbis who oppose them claim that separate women's prayer groups are not part of Orthodox tradition, that they are not halakhic, or that the participants are motivated by feminism rather than by spiritual needs.[9]

Although the prayer groups follow the religious-legal guidelines of Orthodox rabbis who approve of them, the prayer groups have become a focal point in the ongoing debate in Orthodox Judaism regarding the expansion of options and practices for women. Leaders of the women's *tefillah* movement believe that the public opposition expressed by the Queens Va'ad of Orthodox rabbis in January 1997 has spurred the growth of new groups and increased participation in existing groups. The women involved in prayer groups, many of whom have extensive religious education, see themselves as raising important questions about the system of rabbinic Judaism as interpreted by male rabbis, while at the same time maintaining loyalty to Jewish law.

Rabbinic authority cannot easily be ignored by the women, because Orthodoxy is based on fealty to laws established centuries ago by rabbinic scholars, on the basis of the legal discussions committed to writing in the

Mishnah and Talmud in the second through fifth centuries C.E. The rabbis in each generation may interpret Jewish law using established legal principles. The women who participate in prayer groups desire to remain Orthodox, and therefore want and need the approval of recognized halakhic scholars or rabbis. Traditional Orthodoxy does not recognize women as competent to become halakhic authorities.

Women's prayer groups are only one area where Orthodox Jewish women are seeking to expand the boundaries of their social and religious roles. Women, traditionally excluded from advanced Torah scholarship, are now engaging in high-level study of religious texts in educational institutions for women in the United States and in Israel. Another priority is redressing the inferior status of women in matters of marriage and divorce, principally by means of activism on behalf of women struggling to secure religious divorces from recalcitrant husbands. All these issues were important focal points of the recent Second International Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy.

Theoretical Background

Many in the field of religion have used the framework of the small group to document the need for meaningful intimate relationships and community in a society that is impersonal and has suffered a decline in community. They view the proliferation of Bible study and prayer groups in the United States as a response to these needs.[10] While the small group model is useful in explaining why Orthodox women join prayer groups, I believe that rational choice theory can provide a more comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon.

Rational choice theory posits that people act rationally and seek to resolve problems by balancing what they perceive to be rewards against what they perceive to be costs.[11] If religious expression is conceptualized in this way, it may be said that an individual's "religious capital" consists of faith, doctrinal knowledge, sensitivities (which include the emotional aspect of religious commitment), skills and rituals, as well as community benefits, friendships and social networks. People's ability to participate actively in religious affairs adds to their religious capital, and this increases the satisfaction they receive from their religious activities.[12]

The concept of sensitivities, as explained by Ellison, refers to ways of thinking about religion – for example, whether one prefers a lenient or a strict denomination – and what people value in religion. Sensitivities are shaped primarily by religious socialization and experience. They influence people's religious choices and their calculation of the specific costs and benefits upon which those choices presumably are based.[13]

Preferences for certain religious goods, such as ritual practices in the synagogue, also emerge from religious socialization and experience. However, preferences can change when social contacts expose people to new religious goods. In this context, a women's prayer group can be viewed as a new religious good. Darren Sherkat, who has discussed social influences on choices for religious goods, differentiates between preference – that is, what people want – and choice, what people decide to do.[14] Though people might prefer certain religious goods, social influences may cause them to adjust those preferences and select what they consider to be feasible options. In this view, normative constraints might be associated with certain choices.

As part of my study of Orthodox women's prayer groups, I explored the question of whether participating in the prayer groups while remaining Orthodox might represent a rational choice. Briefly, I found that the group under study had a substantial amount of religious capital invested in Orthodox Judaism, including faith and doctrinal knowledge as well as friendship networks and family relationships. They did not want to abandon Orthodox Judaism or jeopardize their religious capital by actively advocating or participating in the type of women's prayer group they might have preferred. Rabbinic opposition to prayer groups that perform the complete liturgy, as in a *minyan* of men, acted as a constraint on choice. The women therefore chose a to participate in a limited prayer group conforming to Orthodox law.

Sample and Methods

The sample was selected by contacting the coordinators of seven women's prayer groups in the New York metropolitan area and asking them for names of women in their groups to interview. I presented myself to the coordinators, and later to potential interviewees, as a sociologist who has

studied women's role in Judaism and is interested in the phenomenon of Orthodox women's prayer groups. I mentioned my dissertation research, which explored influences that led Orthodox women to either maintain religiosity or disengage from Orthodox Judaism. The sample consisted of women of various ages and marital status, urban and suburban residents, group founders and leaders, as well as other participants.

An open-ended interview format was used. A number of pilot interviews helped sharpen the focus of the interview schedule. Everyone was asked the same questions, but follow-up questions varied so that issues emphasized by the women could be explored. My analysis is based on these recorded interviews. As an Orthodox Jew and a woman who has coped with the issues addressed by this study, I combined an insider's perspective with the sociologist's tools of description and analysis.

Findings

A demographic profile of the 27 respondents revealed women ranging in age from 25 to 63, with a mean age of 48. Eighty-one percent were married, and on average they had 2 to 3 children. Ninety-two percent had a master's degree or more, and seventy-four percent worked outside the home for pay. Seventy percent came from Orthodox homes, while the remainder were women who became Orthodox, usually as young adults. Over half had attended an all-day parochial school through high school. All described themselves as either centrist or modern Orthodox; they fully subscribe to Jewish law but are open to modern ideas and culture as long as they don't conflict with Judaism. They approve of religious Jews pursuing secular undergraduate and graduate-level studies and professional degrees, and they support Zionism and working with Jews in all denominations toward common goals.

Reasons for Participating in Prayer Groups

When asked why they wanted to participate in separate, all-women prayer groups, a surprising pattern emerged among most of the interviewees. Recurring themes were: a spiritual search for meaningful, quiet, serious

prayer; a connection to God; a feeling of community; and a desire to celebrate rites of passage. The most frequent response was: to seek a meaningful religious experience and participate actively in services. Over three-quarters felt left out in regular congregational Sabbath and holiday services. The women indicated a desire for an intense, spiritually gratifying religious experience, which they believed could best be achieved in a framework where women lead services, pray together and read from the Torah.

There are several parallels between Catholic and Protestant women who have formed prayer and Bible study groups and the Orthodox women. Catholic and Protestant women were seeking a spiritually gratifying religious experience and wanted to lead services. Like the Orthodox women, they remained loyal to their church and attended church services. They felt that the benefits of remaining loyal to their church outweighed their exclusion from leadership roles at regular church services and in religious institutions.[15] Another study found that the Roman Catholic women who developed the "limina" ceremony spoke of trying to meet their needs as contemporary women without competing directly with family celebrations.[16] Similarly, the Orthodox Jewish women did not want the community to view them as competing with the Sabbath synagogue services. Most therefore held services once a month, while a few groups met for Sabbath afternoon prayers.

Remaining Loyal to Orthodox Judaism

The women I studied said that they receive many benefits from Orthodoxy and do not want to switch to an egalitarian denomination. Although conflicted over women's status, only six of the twenty-seven women ever considered leaving Orthodoxy. Three recurring reasons for continuing Orthodox affiliation emerged: the importance of a personal link to the past and through it to the present and the future; the belief that Orthodoxy represents the only historically authentic and consistent tradition; and the conviction that Orthodoxy is the only Jewish denomination able to transmit tradition to the next generation. The women want to ensure that their children will be Orthodox, and they do not want to lose their ties to the community. They want to fulfill their role as transmitters of tradition.

The following quote focuses on the connection to the past. A mother of three said, "I thought about leaving Orthodoxy when I was a young adult. But I didn't want to give up the spiritual connection to the past." With regard to the authenticity of the tradition, a woman said, "I don't find Conservative or Reform to be internally consistent. There are no clear rules for how to pick and choose." That transmitting tradition to children outweighs personal dissatisfactions is highlighted in the following quote: "I can't just leave, I've got my children, and I believe that only by being Orthodox can I guarantee that my children will have a strong commitment to their religion. You just can't leave. You could, but if you do you lose your family, your community."

Ambivalence Concerning the Practices of Women's Prayer Groups

Are Orthodox women satisfied with the ritual practices of their prayer groups? Although most of the women initially claimed to be satisfied with their groups as they are, further exploration revealed that fifty-five percent would like to do more in their prayer services, another thirty percent are ambivalent, and a minority would like to do all that men do in the synagogue.

One source of differences concerns the prayers that can only be said when a *minyan* is present, which women, according to most Orthodox interpretations of Jewish law, may not say in their prayer groups. Many if not most of the women, given an unconstrained choice, would want to include these prayers. As one woman said, "The truth is, it's very nice, but it's missing something. It's missing *kedushah*, it's missing *barekhu*" (two liturgical elements that can be recited only in the presence of a *minyan*).

The *kaddish* (a prayer recited by mourners for eleven months after the death of a parent and sometimes for other relatives, and then each year on the anniversary of the death) requires a *minyan*, and most authorities hold that it should be recited only by men. Nevertheless, a few women in mourning have asked their groups for permission to recite the *kaddish* in this framework (some were aware that a certain well-known rabbi had expressed the opinion that a quorum of women could be considered a *minyan*, but had later rescinded it[17]). There was heated disagreement in the groups when this issue was discussed. Although many of the women would

prefer a complete prayer service, the majority view attempting to secure rabbinic approval to say the *kaddish* at a women's prayer group as confrontational. They know that there is a halakhic precedent for women to say the prayer from the women's section at the regular service,[18] but rabbis discourage women from doing so and only a few actually allow it. One alternative to the *kaddish*, which some groups have tried, is to commemorate a parent's death with a religious discourse, a recitation of Psalms or other prayers. By and large, most of the women dealt with the prohibition against reciting prayers for which a *minyan* is required by reiterating that their prayer services are halakhic and that they do not consider their group a *minyan*. They accept these liturgical limitations, though they would prefer a liturgically complete prayer service, because they desire to remain Orthodox.

Another difference of opinion concerns the blessings that are said when one is called to the Torah. Since women are considered exempt from the obligation to read the Torah in public, most Orthodox authorities hold that they are not entitled to say these blessings. Rabbis who approve of women's prayer groups have expressed differing views on this subject. Some groups are experimenting with innovative liturgy to substitute for the blessings. In at least one prayer group, the rabbi of the synagogue has suggested possible liturgical formulae.

Many of the women would like the prayer groups to meet more often than one Saturday a month and to meet during the summer, and they want more women, especially younger women, to attend. However, most of the groups cannot meet more frequently for reasons related to the women themselves. At present, the only weekday prayer group meets at Columbia University in New York. Attracting young adults to women's prayer groups is a serious issue for the participants. Some said that their teenage daughters, who had participated in women's prayer groups as high school students, stopped attending due to the influence of religious studies teachers during their post-high school year of study in Israel.

Desire for Innovative Practices in the Synagogue

The women also desire changes in the Sabbath service in the synagogue that would enable them to feel more a part of these male-dominated

services. Changes that are considered by some authorities to be halakhically permissible include walking with the Torah through the women's section when it is removed and returned to the ark (as is done in the men's section); allowing women to deliver the sermon from the front of the synagogue during services; and lowering the *mehitzah* (the partition separating the men's from the women's section) so that women can have a better view of the services. Some desire a different seating arrangement, with the *mehitzah* running down the middle from the front to the rear of the synagogue, instead of the more usual horizontal split, with the women seated at the back. The side-by-side arrangement, which already exists in some synagogues, would allow women to be closer to the Torah ark and the cantor's platform. Some women complained that rabbis do not seem to be speaking to the women during sermons. Others desire leadership roles in the administration of the synagogue (proscribed in some synagogues by institutional policy rather than by the rabbi). All of these changes are meant to lessen women's painful sense of exclusion in the synagogue.

The issues raised in the interviews are similar to those discussed on the Women's Tefillah Network. This electronic forum allows women all over the world to communicate with one another on the subject of prayer groups, share feelings about their exclusion from the synagogue service and discuss practices and possible innovations. The women share information about rabbis and synagogues that allow women a more active role or even to have their own services for certain holidays. Other issues discussed have included the rabbinic views of women that inform the halakhic decision-making process, the possibility that a women's group might be viewed as a *minyan* within the Orthodox legal system, and restrictions on women in other areas of Judaism. Two college professors with rabbinic ordination, who hold opposing views, contribute to this discussion.[19]

Conflicts between Preference and Choice

The alternatives facing the women include attending only the usual Sabbath services, attending women's services in which not all the rituals are practiced, and going outside Orthodoxy to attend egalitarian services in which women may take part in the entire ritual. All the respondents rejected egalitarian services, because they wanted to adhere to halakhah.

They attended Orthodox Sabbath services during the weeks when the women's services did not meet. The women experienced conflict between wanting to do more in their prayer service and current halakhic limits on participation, alongside satisfaction with the changes they have achieved thus far. As one said, "It would be nice if women could be a *minyan*, I don't miss it that much, there's a big gulf between things that can be changed and things that can't." Another woman said, "I look for little gains and try to ignore the rest." The following quote captures the women's compromise position: "As long as there is an outlet for women, I want to leave halakhah as is except where it can be pushed."

The women state a willingness to work within Orthodoxy to achieve their goal: a prayer service that includes most of the regular synagogue service. They emphasize wanting to maintain the integrity of the halakhic system, but desire an open and serious discussion of halakhic sources whereby they would be allowed more active participation in prayer services and in organized Jewish life. The participants in the prayer groups accept the compromise of a limited prayer group because they believe that this is all that the rabbis who support them are willing to approve at this time, and because they are committed to the halakhic process. They say that they approve only what the rabbis approve, but will work for future change. This stance shows how constraints affect choice.

Responses to Rabbinic Disapproval

However much the participants in women's prayer groups accept the authority of rabbinic opinion, rabbinic opposition did not sit well with them. They were asked to comment on the 1984 opinion of five rabbis from Yeshiva University (which is associated with modern Orthodoxy) and the 1997 opinion of the Queens rabbis, both opposed to women's prayer groups. Only one woman expressed sympathy for the rabbis, saying: "It is difficult for the rabbis to cope with secular influences. Their idea is to put up a dike." The majority of the women, as seen in the following quotes, are critical of the rabbis:

> It's a power issue. I think they're threatened by women's power and authority.

The rabbis are afraid the women will ask for more.
They're looking over their shoulder, trying to find favor with their right-wing colleagues.
The rabbis who disapprove can't find a halakhic objection.
It's not Orthodoxy that's a problem. It's a perversion by the rabbis, who are exercising misguided leadership.

The women felt that the rabbis' opposition was not based on halakhah, but rather on their fear of change in women's roles and on their desire to be accepted by their colleagues. They hoped to convince the rabbinic opposition and the Orthodox community that prayer groups will satisfy the needs of women, especially educated professional women, and thereby ensure their loyalty.

Between Orthodoxy and Feminism: Managing the Tensions

The women are careful to present themselves as sincere, religious women who are motivated not by feminism but by a desire to enhance their spirituality through prayer. As one articulate woman said, "This is not about feminism. This is about participation and achieving meaningful prayer." Another said, "I see myself as Orthodox and feminist, someone who adopts feminism as long as it doesn't conflict with halakhah." The clearest expression of the women's feelings was the following: "I hate that word – feminism – it carries associations that don't apply to me. Most of us don't come out of the secular feminist movement." Most said they are feminist only to the extent that they believe in equality for women in the labor force.

The women do not identify with secular feminism, which many perceive as anti-family or anti-male, but they support initiatives for expanded roles for women within Orthodox Judaism. Thus, they favor the agenda of the Feminism and Orthodoxy conference regarding *agunot* (women whose husbands refuse to grant them a religious divorce), advocacy of women's halakhic scholarship and additional ritual participation in various areas. One might say that the women are feminists, but they feel a need to delineate exactly what they mean by that term.

The denial of feminist influences may serve as a tactic designed to

counter most rabbis' perception of women's prayer groups as motivated by secular feminism. Some of the women were familiar with the position of a revered twentieth-century halakhic authority who permits a limited women's prayer group if the women's motivation for desiring it is sincerely religious.[20] For this reason, convincing rabbis that their motive is spiritual is crucial if the prayer groups are to gain wider acceptance among rabbis and laypersons. (This perception may be changing among some rabbis. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein is one well-known rabbi who has said recently that rabbis should stop questioning the motives of women who seek greater participation in prayer and study, since men, too, do not always act purely out of spiritual motives in this respect.) However, although the participants' high levels of secular education, their work experience and the impact of feminism clearly play a role, I am convinced that their desire for active participation and meaningful prayer is indeed motivated by a religious impulse. Their commitment to prayer is indicated by the testimony of most of the women that they pray daily at home and, despite their dissatisfaction, attend traditional Sabbath synagogue services when the prayer group does not meet.

Strategies for Change and Impression Management

In our everyday interactions with people, we attempt to convey impressions of who we are. Erving Goffman calls this impression management.[21] In the women's strategies for change discussed below, we note how the women assume certain postures that, in effect, reflect positively on their motivation and behavior.

Because so few rabbis openly approve of prayer groups and most oppose them, the women de-emphasize their desire to do more in their prayer groups and clearly state that they are loyal to halakhah. There are, however, differences over how to pursue change. In some groups, participants disagreed over whether the group should keep a low profile or publicize its services. Some of them have the approval of their synagogue rabbis, who announce when the groups meet, provide them with a room in the synagogue and occasionally speak at the services, especially if the occasion is a bat mitzvah or a forthcoming wedding. Other groups operate with the tacit support of a local rabbi, while still others, lacking even this,

conduct services in a private home. Groups of the last type maintain a particularly low profile, publicizing their meetings only by sending notices to women on their own mailing lists.

Administrative meetings of the groups have, at times, dealt with questions that raise the issue of reconsidering their halakhic status, such as whether to allow a woman to say *kaddish* in the group, or whether to discuss with a rabbi the possibility of the women constituting a *minyan*. Opinions run the gamut from opposition to approval of these initiatives, but a majority were opposed. One woman said,

> For a while we had some newcomers who were militant feminists. They wanted a more inclusive service, but many of us didn't want to upset things. I, for one, wouldn't go to the rabbis asking them to consider us a quorum, because I don't want to be ridiculed. Some of them left for an egalitarian service.

The consensus of the participants in the prayer groups is to proceed with caution. They fear that progress may be jeopardized by too militant a stance. If they are perceived by rabbis as too aggressive in advocating a fuller service, the rabbis will think of them as feminists rather than as women who are motivated to enhance their spirituality by active participation in prayer services. A few women expressed the view that before the groups press more actively for an end to liturgical limitations, more women have to be attracted to them, and more rabbis have to be convinced that they are a positive contribution to Orthodoxy. Only then will rabbis eliminate some of the restrictions governing their services.

The women believe that the rabbis eventually will permit a more complete prayer service, based on their awareness that Jewish law has responded to new challenges in the past with halakhic modifications. They are also aware that halakhic change occurs slowly and that innovations are often suspect. They liken the contemporary controversy over prayer groups to the rabbinic opposition faced by Sarah Schenirer when she pioneered formal religious education for Orthodox women in 1917.[22] The now-universal rabbinic approval of religious education for women, and, later, the approval by some rabbis of Talmud study by women, permit the participants to believe that prayer groups for women, too, will become more widely accepted, and a more complete prayer service will be

approved. This mode of thinking does not appear to represent rationalization or an attempt to resolve cognitive dissonance. It allows the women to preserve the religious capital they have invested in Orthodoxy.

Strategic Priorities: Women Scholars

The women voiced concern about other aspects of Orthodox women's lives and wondered whether efforts for change should be focused on prayer groups, organizational activity on behalf of *agunot*, developing a cadre of women with a talmudic education similar to that received by men studying for the rabbinate, or all these options simultaneously. At a meeting held to share the findings of this research with the women from one of the prayer groups, they debated whether they should focus on convincing more women and rabbis of the importance of prayer groups or on studying texts that will familiarize women with the halakhic process. Some expressed the view that since resources are limited, energy needs be expended in the area that will produce the most gains for women.

The monopolization of halakhic knowledge by men, and specifically by rabbis, is seen as an obstacle to change. The women therefore view greater involvement in religious studies, particularly halakhic literature, as a way to enable them to engage community leaders in educated discourse on the issues that concern them. For example, several women said that rabbis, when responding to some of their questions, do not state halakhic objections but aver that some things cannot be done by women because there is no precedent. This perception that the rabbis are relying on the strength of tradition rather than the letter of the law motivates the women to gain a better understanding of the legal foundations of Orthodoxy. Clearly, the women view the rabbis rather than God as responsible for a halakhic system that responds all too slowly to new needs and situations.

The modern Orthodox women in this study were seeking in-depth religious knowledge on an analytical, philosophical and abstract level. This is in marked contrast to the ultra-Orthodox women studied by Tamar El-Or, who are socialized to be satisfied with practical knowledge useful in their day-to-day practice of Orthodox Judaism.[23] Ways of thinking about religion and women's place in it are influenced by religious socialization and religious education.

The majority of the women, 19 out of 27, support women becoming halakhic scholars and decisors of religious law (*poskot*). Currently, only a male who is ordained as a rabbi can be a *posek*. The prayer group participants believe that women so trained would clarify whether some rulings pertaining to women are based not on halakhic necessity but on cultural influences in the historical period in which they were handed down or on notions of women's nature that are no longer applicable, and this will lead to the modification of rulings that women find offensive. Female decisors would be able to answer religious questions that women feel uncomfortable asking a male rabbi, and would be sympathetic to women's problems. Women scholars would also help find solutions to the problem of women whose husbands refuse to grant them a religious divorce – a problem that, the participants believe, has not been solved by the male rabbinic establishment because it affects only women. The participants knew of many women already studying to become experts in Jewish law, and stated their belief that these scholars eventually will be recognized by the Orthodox Jewish community as qualified *poskot*.

Conclusion

The participants in women's prayer groups are determined to continue their prayer services and advocate change, despite opposition from much of the Orthodox rabbinical establishment. They are motivated by their strong desire for active participation in prayer and their belief that in modern society, highly educated women need to participate actively in religious life in order to remain satisfied with Orthodoxy. They are committed to transmitting tradition to their daughters, and voiced concern that their daughters and other women would leave Orthodoxy over the issue of roles for women. In addition, the participants see themselves as open to new ideas, and they enjoy being on the cutting edge of new developments.

The women's strong commitment to Orthodoxy influences them to mute their desire for a complete prayer service and to wait for the halakhah to catch up with what they feel is imperative. The following comment is typical: "We are not going to go away. We will continue to have prayer services until all the rabbis realize the correctness of our position." As

Nietz states about the Catholic women she studied, "The women are engaged in a process of redefining the gendered nature of public and private space in culture."[24] By presenting themselves as non-feminists with sincere religious motives, minimizing their desire to eliminate restrictions in their services, devising alternative liturgy, becoming more knowledgeable about issues pertaining to women and developing a cadre of female religious scholars, the participants in Orthodox women's prayer groups hope to achieve their goals.

In their search for meaning, the women in this study chose to remain faithful to Orthodox Judaism and work for change within it, despite the restrictions to their preferences. They believe that ultimately all impediments to their full participation in prayer will be eliminated, that women will become halakhic scholars and assume leadership roles in the synagogue and the community, and that the inferior status of women in religious divorce will be redressed. These convictions enable them to maintain their loyalty to Orthodox Judaism.

Notes

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1. The United States Census Bureau data on women's current educational achievements and employment can be found at www.census.gov/Press-Release/cb97-122.html and cb97-199.html. Data from the early 1970s can be found in Chapters 1, 2 and 4 of the 1975 *Handbook on Women Workers*, Bulletin 297, published by the Women's Bureau of the Employment Standards Administration of the U.S. Department of Labor (1975).
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Books, 1969); Vivian Gornick and Barbara Moran (eds.), *Woman in Sexist Society* (New York: New American Library, 1971); Marcia Millman and Rosabeth Moss Kanter (eds.), *Another Voice* (New York: Anchor Books, 1975).

4. Robert Wuthnow (ed.), *"I Come Away Stronger": How Small Groups Are Shaping American Religion* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1994).

5. For just a few examples of Jewish feminist literature, see Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman and Sonya Michel, *The Jewish Woman in America* (New York: New American Library, 1975); Elizabeth Koltun (ed.), *The Jewish Woman* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976); Susannah Heschel (ed.), *On Being a Jewish Feminist* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983); Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981); and Susan Weidman Schneider, *Jewish and Female* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

6. For the differing opinions of the Sages on the nature of women's prayer obligations, see Abraham Weiss, *Women at Prayer: A Halakhic Analysis of Women's Prayer Groups* (New York: Ktav, 1990), pp. 13–29.

7. Several women who have been actively involved in women's prayer groups confirm that the first service took place on Simchat Torah, 1972, at Lincoln Square Synagogue in New York City.

8. For a description of women's prayer groups, see Rivka Haut, "Women's Prayer Groups and the Orthodox Synagogue," and Yael, Talya, and Yonina Penkower, "Bat Mitzvah: Coming of Age in Brooklyn," both in Rivka Haut and Susan Grossman (eds.), *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1992), pp. 135–158 and 265–270.

9. Mayer Twersky, "Torah Perspectives on Women's Issues," *Jewish Action*, 57:4 (Summer 1995), pp. 24–29.

10. On the applicability of small group theory to the study of religion, see Lynn Davidman, "I Come Away Stronger: The Religious Impact of a Loosely Structured Jewish Feminist Group," p. 341; Robert C. Liebman, "Finding a Place: The Vision of Havurah," p. 311; and Robert Wuthnow, "The Small Group Movement in the Context of American Religion," p. 386, all in Wuthnow, *"I Come Away Stronger"* (above, note 4). See also Miriam Therese Winter, Adair Lummis and Allison Stokes, *Defecting in Place: Women Claiming Responsibility for Their Own Spiritual Lives* (New York: Crossroads, 1995), pp. 59–60; and Stuart A. Wright, "Religious Innovation in the Mainline Church: House Churches, Home Cells, and Small Groups," in Nancy Tatom Ammerman and Wade Clark Roof (eds.), *Work, Family, and Religion in Contemporary Society* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 261–263 and 265.

11. Rodney Stark, "Bringing Theory Back In," in Lawrence A. Young (ed.), *Rational Choice Theory and Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 3–24.

12. Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Rational Choice: Framework for the Scientific Study

of Religion," in Young, *Rational Choice Theory* (see previous note), pp. 25–44; idem, "Voodoo Economics? Reviewing the Rational Choice Approach to Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 34 (1995), pp. 76–89; Neil J. Smelser, "The Rational and the Ambivalent in the Social Sciences," *American Sociological Review*, 63 (1998), pp. 1–16.

13. Christopher G. Ellison, "Rational Choice Explanations of Individual Religious Behavior: Notes on the Problem of Social Embeddedness," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 34 (1995), pp. 89–97.

14. Darren E. Sherkat, "Embedding Religious Choices: Integrating Preferences and Social Constraints into Rational Choice Theories of Religious Behavior," in Young, *Rational Choice Theory* (above, note 11), pp. 65–86.

15. In *Defecting in Place*, Winter, Lummis and Stokes (above, note 10) write about the dissatisfactions of Christian women with institutional churches and the needs that are met by their participation in Bible study or prayer groups.

16. Mary Jo Nietz, "Constructing Women's Rituals: Roman Catholic Women and 'Limina'," in Ammerman and Roof, *Work, Family, and Religion* (above, note 10), pp. 283–304.

17. Weiss, *Women at Prayer* (above, note 6), pp. 110–111. The confidential halakhic opinion of Rabbi Shlomo Goren allowing women to recite *devarim shebikedushah* is discussed in note 38.

18. Joel B. Wolowelsky, *Women, Jewish Law, and Modernity. New Opportunities in a Post-Feminist Age* (New York: Ktav, 1997), pp. 84–94. The author reviews the sources regarding the permissibility of women saying *kaddish* in a *minyan* of men.

19. The address of the Women's Tefillah Network is wtn@shamash.org.

20. See Weiss, *Women at Prayer* (above, note 6), p. 108, for the text of the letter containing the opinion of Rav Moshe Feinstein, that "a group of righteous women whose intention is purely for the sake of Heaven" may pray together and read from the Torah.

21. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

22. Deborah Weissman discusses the efforts of Sarah Schenirer to establish religious schools for girls, in "Bais Yaakov: A Historical Model for Jewish Feminists," in Elizabeth Koltun (ed.), *The Jewish Woman* (New York: Schocken, 1976), pp. 139–148.

23. Tamar El-Or, *Educated and Ignorant: Ultraorthodox Jewish Women and Their World* (English transl. by Haim Watzman, London: Lynne Rienner, 1994).

24. Nietz, "Constructing Women's Rituals" (above, note 16), p. 289.