EDUCATING AN ORTHODOX FEMINIST: MALE AND FEMALE

Master’s Thesis

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By
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Acknowledgements

In September 2005 in Toronto, Canada Kehilat Or Hadash (Toronto’s first student-run partnership minyan) met for the first time on a Shabbat morning at the Wolfond Centre for Jewish Campus Life at the University of Toronto. Having previously attended Kehilat Shira Hadasha in Jerusalem, a partnership minyan founded in 2002, I understood that this was the optimal prayer community and experience for me. When a group of students decide to transport this style of davening to my community in Toronto I was elated. After spending my last two undergraduate years involved with Or Hadash as a board member and Torah reader, I decided that the value I placed on this community and on partnership minyanim should be a factor in my search for graduate school. After my acceptance to Brandeis University, I moved to Cambridge, MA and became active in both the leadership and ritual activities of Minyan Tehillah.

I would like to thank the founders, board and community members of Kehilat Shira Hadasha, Kehilat Or Hadash and Minyan Tehillah – the three partnership minyanim in the communities in which I have lived – for providing me not only social and leadership opportunities within a prayer community but also with a spiritual home. My inspiration from all of this has led me to write my thesis on the topic of partnership minyanim. I am grateful to the members of Minyan Tehillah who have volunteered their time to share their rich experiences with me and have participated as interviewees for this project. I thank them for entrusting me with their personal anecdotes, sentiments and

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1 A partnership minyan is a prayer group that is both committed to maintaining halakhic standards and practices and also committed to including women in ritual leadership roles to the fullest extent possible within the boundaries of Jewish Law. The minyan is made up of 10 men, men and women are separated by a mechitzah, and the traditional liturgy is used. However, women may fully participate in kriyat ha'Torah, including layning and receiving aliyyot, and may lead parts of the prayer service such as psukei d'zimrah and kabbalat Shabbat, which do not contain d'varim she b'kedusha. (www.jofa.org)
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Abstract

Educating an Orthodox Feminist: Male and Female

A thesis presented to the Department of Near Eastern & Judaic Studies

Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University
Waltham, Massachusetts

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Affiliated as a “partnership minyan” through the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA), Minyan Tehillah in Cambridge, MA is an independent minyan (prayer community) that is committed to maximizing women’s participation in ritual leadership roles within the boundaries of halakhic (Jewish legal) standards and practices and by partnering men and women in leading religious services using traditional liturgy. As an independent minyan founded in 2003, Tehillah attracts people from a variety of Jewish backgrounds, although it was founded by community members affiliated as Modern Orthodox. My research was therefore guided by my interest in how people raised Modern Orthodox become involved in a prayer community that pushes boundaries and promotes new ways of thinking about Jewish prayer and feminism.

My research explored and analyzed the educational experiences of fifteen male and female participants of Minyan Tehillah in their twenties and thirties who self-identify as having been raised Modern Orthodox in North America. Their upbringing and background in the home, school and community as well as their attitudes toward Modern Orthodoxy, feminism and the type of prayer community in which they are involved have
all been studied, as they are all indications of what constitutes one’s Jewish religious
identity and preference for a prayer community.

My research addresses the themes: relationships with mothers and fathers, transformational experiences such as the Bat Mitzvah, involvement in school and synagogue *minyanim*, influence of teachers and text study and educational experiences in Israel. Following a comparison of these themes, my paper addresses the attitudes of Minyan Tehillah’s members with regard to Modern Orthodoxy and partnership minyanim. To conclude, the paper highlights the complexities that Minyan Tehillah presents and the challenges that its members experience and see the *minyan* experiencing.
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Introduction

Over the past two decades, Jewish schoolchildren, both male and female, have experienced unprecedented parity in terms of access to Jewish education through teachers and texts alike. Not only have day schools of various affiliations and ideologies proliferated over the past several decades throughout North America, but access to Jewish education for girls, particularly in the Orthodox world, has increased. Although public Jewish ritual life in the Orthodox world has largely remained a male experience, educational opportunities, curricula and texts have been increasingly afforded to women. If there is one area of the mainstream Orthodox world which has achieved some sense of egalitarianism it would be the North American Modern Orthodox day school classroom.

Formal education or schooling, however, does not occur in a vacuum. It is rather one component of a holistic educational environment in which a child is raised, encompassing home and community as well. These latter components play an important role. Particularly in a Modern Orthodox context, a Modern Orthodox life at home, at school and in the community can work cohesively to reflect and harmonize each others values. But these environments can also expose a conflict between gender equality, as witnessed and experienced in modern, secular society, and the traditional attitudes and expressions toward gender that a Modern Orthodox environment can generate both in and out of school.
I am interested in the constructed identities of those who have been raised in Modern Orthodox environments of the home, school and community and how their identities have not only been developed but how they have shaped their Jewish ritual involvement today, such as in prayer communities and the synagogue. I am interested in what goes into the education of a Modern Orthodox feminist and have decided to learn more about this by interviewing those who have arrived at this identity. This interest was motivated by my learning about three women, Tova Hartman, Blu Greenberg and Haviva Ner-David, who were raised in a Modern Orthodox context in North America during different parts of the late 20th century. Each of them speaks to the conflict of a Modern Orthodox identity as played out by ritual involvement and religious study. Their writings also helped frame both the focus and methodology of my study because just as I began to understand the experiences that molded the identities of Hartman, Greenberg and Ner-David through their personal anecdotes, so too did I want to both understand the educational experiences of members of Minyan Tehillah who affiliate with Modern Orthodoxy. As I learned, there is much in common between the writings of the aforementioned women and the anecdotes provided by my interviewees, which I have used for the basis of my paper. Their writings (and anecdotes) help frame the reality of the personal conflicts and challenges of Orthodoxy and feminism over the span of several decades.

Tova Hartman, in her book *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism: Resistance and Accommodation*, writes about the educational experiences of her daughters:

In the books my daughters brought home from their Israeli Modern Orthodox schools, the section about how to keep a kosher home featured pictures of
mothers in the kitchen outfitted in aprons, serving the father his meal. When another of my daughters was seven, her grade celebrated receiving their first siddurim by creating a model shul. Previously, the boys and girls had prayed together from their seats in the coed classroom. For the party, the room was divided into front and back sections. The boys sang real prayers from the front of the room, while the girls, outfitted in headscarves for the special occasion, sang “Woman of Valor” – the section of Proverbs 31 with which husbands traditionally serenade their wives at the Friday-night Sabbath dinner table preceding the meal.¹

From a young age, products of this particular school experience constructed gender hierarchy. With few female models of leadership in the Jewish canon and the absence of girls in classroom ritual life, both in elementary school and especially post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah age, the acceptance of strongly differentiated and segregated gender roles is likely to remain. After all, much of the Modern Orthodox philosophy and identity depends on the ability to dichotomize what occurs in one’s ritual, religious life from one’s modern identity through which secular knowledge has passed.

Gilla Rosen, in her article titled On Feminism and Judaism discusses this phenomenon and calls this “intellectual schizophrenia,” meaning that many religious women who have been afforded advanced status and maximized educational opportunity see the beliefs that led to these advancements within educational opportunities as antagonistic to traditional ritual observance within Judaism.² Others experience compartmentalization or find themselves in a state of cognitive dissonance which enables them to separate the equal role of, for example, women within a profession or girls within a day school classroom and the unequal role of silent spectator that is afforded to them during prayer services when they are seated behind or beside a mehitzah. According to Hartman, values of modern day, secular society,

however, should not be seen in opposition to a religiously observant lifestyle. In her book she confronts this issue and challenges the reader by stating, “Modern Orthodox adherents all go to universities; the question is how do the universities go through them?”

Despite a gender hierarchy within Modern Orthodox rituals and religious life, the past quarter century has seen significant advances in opportunities for women’s learning beyond egalitarian day school attendance. Thousands of women study Talmud intensively and have achieved remarkable levels of knowledge, a reflection perhaps on the equal nature of Talmud study in day school classrooms. Hartman calls the advancement of women’s learning, “Modern Orthodoxy’s signature response to the feminist challenge.” My interest and the motivation for my research lie in how this advancement of learning shapes not only the intellectual and academic but also the identities and ritual experiences of both men and women.

In Blu Greenberg’s book On Women and Judaism written in 1981, she discusses her experience as a young woman growing up in New York. She writes about her acceptance of the traditional gender roles in her community and her contentment with her male contemporaries’ Bar Mitzvah ceremonies and their participation in daily minyan. While her parents were interested in her Jewish Studies school subjects, she was nevertheless discouraged from taking a year off and studying intensively with Nechama Leibowitz in Israel because “it wasn’t something a nice Orthodox girl would

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4 ibid.
5 Nechama Leibowitz (1905-1997) was a famous female Israeli biblical scholar and commentator.
do in the 1950s.”6 Had she been a young man, she writes, wanting to stay on and study intensively with a special Israeli rebbe, every encouragement would have been forthcoming.

At one point in her book she reviews her education and recognizes that the study of Talmud, which was a primary goal in her family and community, was closed off to her.7 As she recounts the dissimilar educational experiences that she and her male contemporaries had and the gender hierarchy within her community at times of lifecycle events, she offers a message of optimism and a vision for changing the status quo of Modern Orthodox women. Her description of two female mourners – a wife and daughter being whisked away at their husband and father’s shiva house at the moment prayer began is juxtaposed with her first experience of a women’s minyan at a conference where she was a guest speaker.8 “I sat at the back of the room and was astounded to hear a woman leading the prayers. Next came another surprise – a woman’s melodious voice reading the Torah with the perfect cantillation. Somehow I had thought that only thirteen year old boys were equal to the task. I found it very beautiful.” She later goes on to describe being asked to do hagba’ah by the gabbaim. “I found it an exhilarating moment. It was the first time I had ever held a Torah scroll.”9

Writing two decades after Blu Greenberg, Haviva Ner-David, in her book Life on the Fringes, also paints a picture of the education she was afforded as a Modern Orthodox girl growing up in New York. “My parents unwittingly planted the seeds.

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7 ibid, p.28
8 ibid, p.29
9 ibid, p. 33
They put me in the same classroom with my male peers with an open book of the Talmud before me. This was a revolutionary step in the Orthodox world at that time, when most girls did not study Talmud – especially not alongside boys – but it was as far as they thought they could go.**10** Ner-David’s dissatisfaction with being a silent spectator and an outsider within Jewish ritual life resulted in her yearning for maximum participation within all aspects of Jewish religious life. While she was given the education and tools that her mother’s generation did not receive but there were still boundaries to be pushed.

In the examples of Hartman, Greenberg and Ner-David, the way that Jewish educational experiences in the school, home and community, have modeled ritual and religious study have had a profound effect on their identities as women and feminists raised in a Modern Orthodox context. Although these examples reflect the experiences of three Orthodox women, men raised in such a Modern Orthodox context have also had profound experiences that contribute to their identities. In framing my research, I have been influenced by the examples of these three Modern Orthodox feminists and the light they shed on how their educational experiences helped shape their identities. Their stories reflect a sense of growth and challenge as they grapple with the realities within the Modern Orthodox world. So too do the anecdotes of my interviews express a sense of growth and challenge within the Modern Orthodox world. These women as well as my interviewees share anecdotes educational experiences, such as in the classroom and in places of higher Jewish learning in Israel, interactions with family members and personal thoughts and philosophies on feminism and Modern Orthodoxy.

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I therefore imagined what questions could have been asked by these women in order to generate their writings and decided to model my interview questions and broader research questions after the information provided by Hartman, Greenberg and Ner-David.

This paper will explore and analyze the educational experiences of male and female participants of the prayer community Minyan Tehillah in Cambridge, MA in 2008-2009. Now in their twenties and thirties, my informants self-identify as having been raised Modern Orthodox in home, in school and in the community as well as their attitudes towards Modern Orthodoxy, feminism and their current prayer experiences for insights about the development of their Jewish religious identity including their prayer community preference and how it is formed and tested. This study rests on the hypothesis that a person’s religious identity and affiliation is influenced by their educational experiences at home, in school and in their community and by teachers, family members and friends. A religious identity and values which guide one’s life develop over time and are shaped by experiences and interactions from childhood. This is the reason why I am probing both the backgrounds of the interviewees as well as their current perspectives on a variety of themes related to and including Orthodoxy and feminism.

I have organized the paper around the main themes that I explored in interviews with my study participants. These include relationships with mothers and fathers, transformational experiences such as the Bat Mitzvah, involvement in school and synagogue minyanim, influence of teachers and text study, and educational experiences in Israel. Following a discussion of these themes and the trends that arise from them,
the paper will address attitudes of Minyan Tehillah’s members with regard to Modern Orthodoxy and partnership minyanim. To conclude, the paper will highlight the complexities that Minyan Tehillah presents and the challenges that its members experience and see the minyan experiencing. Prior to discussing the study, I begin with a brief examination of the literature on the topics of partnership minyanim, independent minyanim and Orthodoxy and feminism. This literature includes Master’s theses and articles on the topic of partnership minyanim, the sociological study of independent minyanim and some classic articles and books on Modern Orthodoxy and feminism as well as on the education of Modern Orthodox feminists.
The phenomenon of independent minyanim and more specifically partnership minyanim is relatively new. Thus, the scholarly literature on the topic is rather scant. Aside from the aforementioned books and articles that helped frame my approach I took to researching narratives through semi-structured interviews, I have also read the sociological study on independent minyanim and three Master’s theses that have approached the topic of partnership minyanim from different angles.

*Emergent Jewish Communities and their Participants: Preliminary Findings from the 2007 National Spiritual Communities Study* by Steven M. Cohen, Shawn Landres, Elie Kaunfer and Michelle Shain. Their widely accepted work looked not only at partnership minyanim but at the contemporary phenomenon of emergent prayer communities. The data from their study that relates specifically to independent minyanim is most significant for understanding the phenomenon of partnership minyanim. As one kind of prayer community, partnership minyanim are categorized under the umbrella of independent minyanim which are lay-led worship communities meeting primarily for prayer services. They are unlike other kinds of emergent Jewish communities, which may be rabbi-led or may operate, absent of prayer, as social justice

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11 Independent minyanim are unaffiliated grassroots prayer groups and are a growing trend in contemporary Judaism. In the United States, most participants of independent minyanim are under the age of 40 and unmarried. Two-thirds of them are women and 40 percent grew up in the institutions of the Conservative movement. A majority of the participants went to Jewish day school, summer camps, participated on programs in Israel and were active in Hillel. The participants enjoy worship services and most participants attend more than one congregation or independent minyan. Members of these minyanim tend to be socially progressive yet religiously traditional.

12 Cohen, Steven M, Landres, Shawn J, Kaunfer, Elie and Shain, Michelle. *Emergent Jewish Communities and Their Participants: Preliminary Finds from the 2007 National Spiritual Communities Study*
operations. The statistics included in their study reflect the phenomenon of Minyan Tehillah as a prayer community consisting of highly engaged in Jewish communal life, single or married men and women under the age of 40, from learned backgrounds who seek a warm, spiritual prayer community (often committed as well to social justice) that uses traditional liturgy. The *Emergent Jewish Communities* study delves into a new phenomenon of the 21st century Jewish world and in order to understand who these communities attract. The statistics that this study provides on members of independent prayer communities have helped me better understand the group of people I researched and have shed light on the religious and educational backgrounds as well as the current opinions and goals of members of independent minyanim.

Sarah Weller’s MA thesis *All Inclusive: A Study of Gender Roles at Minyan Tehillah*\(^\text{13}\) (2008) is a participant-observation study of the organization and members of Minyan Tehillah. In her study, Weller explores how Judaism can be interpreted as a culture and how feminism has developed and changed women’s roles in Orthodox Judaism. Weller also empirically studies the barriers that feminists face in increasing women’s participation in public prayer. She writes about the significance of *mehitzah*, Jewish male leadership’s fear of change, their reasons for prohibiting women from participating in public prayer, arguments against their reasoning and why women who seek these changes remain dedicated to Orthodoxy. In her thesis, in addition to doing participant observations and analyses of routines of the prayer service and the population Minyan Tehillah attracts, she too interviews several founders and members of the *minyan* and has discovered the complexities and challenges that arise in

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attempting to create an independent minyan with a particular philosophy and outlook that may be unpopular in mainstream Modern Orthodoxy.

William Kaplowitz’s thesis *Partnership Minyanim in the United States: Planning Theory in Action* 14 (2008) approaches the topic from the perspective of an urban planner. Kaplowitz looks at sixteen partnership minyanim through the lens of planning ethics and planning theory in order to understand the planning styles of the *minyanim*. He also argues that the goals of these partnership minyanim, which create an atmosphere of inclusiveness and allow their members to take ownership over their religious experience, are analogous to the goals of planners as articulated by the American Planning Association’s Ethical Principles for Planning, which encourages public participation and uproots structures that promote injustice, such that the plans belong to the community in which they are made and not just urban planners. His findings are important to my research because from a very different perspective he addresses a trend among 21st century urban dwellers that also resonates with those who are part of independent minyanim. Both groups of people attempt to maximize participation within their respective communities and are driven by promoting justice as well as a sense of inclusion.

Sharon Strosberg’s thesis titled *The Halakhic Inclusive Minyan: How Can Feminism and Orthodoxy Co-Exist?* (2007), explores the identities and opinions of 14 participants of six different partnership minyanim. 15 Her interviewees discuss the social reasons for involvement in their minyanim, the high Jewish educational levels of the

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other members of their minyanim and how that factors into their choice of prayer community, moral significance of inclusive or egalitarian prayer, and concerns about the future of their minyanim. They also share their sentiments towards the mehitzah and how it becomes an equalizer that blurs marital, class and social status and promotes positive energy during tefillah. Her interviewees also discuss how halakhic Judaism struggles to coexist with current contemporary values. Similar to my work, Strosberg researches who are the members of these minyanim. While I have focused on members of a particular minyan in order to find out which factors contribute to rearing an Orthodox feminist and what we can learn about the outlooks of members of this prayer community about the phenomenon of partnership minyanim, the reasons why they are compelled to attend then and what they think about their fellow participants, she has focused on members of a variety of partnership minyanim in order to understand their motivations for involvement in this particular prayer community. She does not focus on their individual educational backgrounds and the influences of their teachers and families.

Tova Hartman’s 2007 book *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism: Resistance and Accommodation* explores the relationship between contemporary feminist thought and aspects of Jewish tradition. Although previously mentioned, it is important to further detail what her book is about because of not only the breadth of what she discusses but also how her book pertains to the literature on partnership minyanim. She discusses modesty, male imagery in Jewish liturgy, the reaction against

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feminism by traditional rabbis and purity laws for women. Although the book is written from a psychological perspective because Hartman is a professor of psychology and education, it also reflects the perspectives of a founder of the first partnership minyan, Kehillat Shira Hadasha in Jerusalem. From these perspectives, she describes the opposition to the founding and existence of her minyan and the challenges to not only the minyan but to the phenomenon of Orthodoxy and feminism. This book was useful in framing the topics of partnership minyanim and Orthodoxy and feminism through a lens that transcends the sociological issues of the minyan. Rather this book speaks more broadly about Freudian psychology and feminism, halakha, and the contemporary context and issues of gender in Orthodox Judaism. For example, in chapter four, she reconciles with the paternal voice in liturgy but also explains the halakhic basis for not changing the words of fixed prayer. She therefore defends Orthodoxy’s stance on Jewish liturgy while candidly addressing the problems that are present within the liturgy. She similarly articulates both the defense and challenges of other components of a Modern Orthodox observance, such as ritual purity laws and modesty.

Tamar Ross, author of *Expanding the Palace of Torah*,¹⁷ also writes about Orthodoxy and feminism but from a broader, deeper and more objective perspective. Whereas Hartman presents arguments and anecdotes in her book that are from the heart, Ross writes from a philosophical perspective. Her command of history, halakha, psychology, philosophy and theology enables her to explore, through a feminist lens, broad themes on this topic. Ross juxtaposes the opinions of various rabbis and thinkers of various viewpoints on feminism who wouldn’t normally appear on the same podium.

Throughout her book she elucidates the ways of understanding how feminism fits into the Jewish tradition and how it is grappled from multiple perspectives. Ross addresses the topic of *halakha* and by extension women in *halakha* by explaining its place in time, defending its malleability over time and addressing the ways women have advanced within Jewish legal and ritual frameworks.

Both Hartman and Ross frame many important issues ranging from halakhic to historic and psychological to sociological. They also incorporate and elucidate dissenting opinions to their thesis such as by rabbis who are against women’s prayer groups. Hartman also provides an excellent, poignant anecdote about the education of Modern Orthodox children and Ross provides information about the world of higher Jewish learning in Israeli women’s seminaries. Neither one of them, however, provides a focus on the elementary or secondary school education of Orthodox feminists. It is possible, however, to locate literature on the JOFA website about feminism and the education of Orthodox children.

Zvi Grumet, in his article *Orthodox Feminist Education for Boys*, imagines the ideal experience and framework in which an Orthodox feminist education for boys can occur. He argues that boys in this educational system (either sex-segregated or co-ed) must realize that the experience of women is profoundly different from their own and that there is room within the halakhic system to enhance the experience of women, particularly within Jewish ritual. He warns, however, just as Ross and Hartman, that in order for more sensitive educational innovations to occur, there must be fidelity to tradition and *halakha*. This article offers ideas about the education of an Orthodox feminist significant for my research because it proposes opportunities and ideas for

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educating an Orthodox feminist which stress and highlights the importance of sensitive education.

Elana Sztokman, in her article *Feminism in Religious High Schools*,\(^{19}\) also discusses the importance of teaching with sensitivity to the experience of women. She makes her readers aware of the dual societies (both the modern and Orthodox) in which students live and the challenges this situation presents. Many of my interviewees also address this reality. Sztokman envisions how schools can respond to addressing the topic of gender-identity of young religious girls. Although both Grumet and Sztokman discuss the topic of Orthodox education and the sensitivity to gender and women that the atmosphere of a religious school needs to create, they are discussing religious schools in Israel. My research focuses on the products of Modern Orthodox day schools in North America in order to understand the experiences that led them to Minyan Tehillah. While Sztokman and Grumet also address the complexities of feminism and Orthodoxy, they do not provide any empirical data.

Adena Berkowitz, in the JOFA publication *Gender-Sensitive Education in the Early Years*,\(^{20}\) states that it is crucial to consider the long-term educational effects on students when there are no gender-sensitive curricula. She asks how the transformation of the role of girls in Jewish rituals will affect students. She encourages the existence of women’s *tefillah* groups in schools, suggesting that if girls are accustomed to adopting ritual responsibilities at a young age they will not shy away from Jewish public space later on. Her ideas resonate with the experiences and attitudes of some of my interviewees who have experienced gender-sensitive atmospheres in their day schools,

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participated in women’s tefillah groups, and have either experienced or witnessed the encouragement for female students to engage in Jewish ritual.

Blu Greenberg, in Gender Equality and Gender Distinctiveness: A Challenge to Jewish Day School Education, addresses similar themes as Berkowitz and asks similar questions. As well, she provides answers. Greenberg asks how the conflict between gender equality and traditional day school education expresses itself. She answers this question by proposing some solutions. She argues that girls lack positive adult prayer role models, thus a weakened prayer reflex begins at an early age for girls. She also argues that girls are rarely taught rituals and that the young mind unconsciously constructs a gender hierarchy. She does acknowledge that individual institutions have taken the steps to introduce Talmud instruction to girls, raise the significance of Bat Mitzvah and initiate women’s tefillah groups. Entering my research, I contemplated many of the questions and solutions that Greenberg is bringing to the fore and through my research I sought to better understand how these girls are affected by sensitivity to their gender in the day school environment and how this may be associated with their involvement in partnership minyanim.

Comparative Reflections of Modern Orthodoxy and Women’s Issues, an Edah Journal publication on the JOFA website by Sylvia Fishman, is a sociological article highlighting changes in trends among Modern Orthodox Jewish women such as education levels, Jewish learning, lifecycle events and ritual involvement. Fishman discusses intergenerational differences of Modern Orthodox women and posits what

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21 Brod, Harry and Greenberg, Blu. Gender Equality and Gender Distinctiveness: A Challenge to Jewish Day School Education. Women’s Studies Program, Brandeis University
Modern Orthodox women will be doing in the future in terms of pursuits of higher education, professional vocations and lifestyle choices. The data she provides, particularly from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, is important for my research because it provides an overview of the trends among Modern Orthodox women today, such as the increase in Jewish education and the parity of Jewish education and professional positions with their male contemporaries. So too did my research show the increase and development of women’s involvement in Jewish education and how the influence of increased Jewish education and professional parity has impacted the participants of my study. Additionally, she addresses women’s learning and tefillah groups and the attitudes that Modern Orthodox women have today about feminism and the generation in which their mothers were raised. My interviewees similarly address these topics through their anecdotes and share the impact of their mothers on their lives and feminist identities.

In the American Jewish Committee monograph *Changing Minds: Feminism in Contemporary Orthodox Jewish Life*, Sylvia Fishman discusses the way Orthodox Jewish life has been transformed by feminism. This publication addresses a variety of issues that relate to women in Orthodoxy such as public prayer, social-halakhic problems such as the agunot issue and most pertinent for my research, the education of Modern Orthodox women. In this realm, she discusses the transformation of Jewish education (particularly textual learning) for women from one of limited access to one of parity with their male counterparts. Fishman provides an excellent overview of topics related to my research and as she states in her acknowledgements section, it is a project that is finished but is a story that is unfinished.
I hope that my research will contribute a fresh angle to the field of study of Orthodoxy and feminism by providing some insights into the backgrounds, educational experiences and current perspectives of fifteen members of a specific partnership minyan. Others have researched the phenomenon of Orthodoxy and feminism, partnership minyanim (as well as independent minyanim), members of partnership minyanim and Minyan Tehillah in particular. My research looks at the educational background and experiences of people attracted to this minyan. As a Jewish educator, I believe that educational, which includes but goes beyond formal schooling, influences an individual’s identity in ways that can affect them throughout their lives. Through my research I hope to understand the educational experiences of some members of Tehillah and how these experiences have shaped who they are today. Proverbs 22:6 can be translated as "Educate children in the way they should go and when they are old, they will not depart from it." I believe that this is a timeless axiom related to education. I hope that my research can reveal how the ways in which children are educated and socialized affect them throughout their lives and influence the direction in which they go.
Minyan Tehillah

Affiliated as a “partnership minyan” through the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA), Minyan Tehillah in Cambridge, MA is an independent minyan committed to maximizing women’s participation in ritual leadership roles within the boundaries of halakhic standards and practices and by partnering men and women in leading religious services. About a dozen and a half or so (and growing!) partnership minyanim exist across North America, Israel and Australia in cities with large Jewish communities such as Los Angeles and New York and near university campuses in such cities as Evanston, IL and New Haven, CT. These minyanim receive resources including articles, contact information and networking opportunities from the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance website (www.jofa.org) and The Minyan Project, which operates within the Mechon Hadar (www.mechonhadar.org) in New York City to support independent minyanim in the United States.

At Minyan Tehillah, ten men, fulfilling the halakhic understanding of a quorum needed to begin communal prayer, and ten women, an action imposed by some partnership minyanim for purposes of maximized participation and sensitivity, are required to begin the parts of the service that require a minyan. Men and women are separated by a mehitzah and traditional liturgy, from standard Orthodox siddurim, is used throughout the service. Although men lead parts of the service that require a minyan, women fully participate in the Torah service through layning (reading Torah) and receiving aliyyot (reciting Torah blessings) and lead parts of the service that do not
require a prayer quorum, such as psukei d’zimrah (introductory Psalms) and kabbalat Shabbat (service welcoming the Sabbath).  

The halakhic justification for partnership minyanim has been addressed and supported by Rabbis Mendel Shapiro and Daniel Sperber in “Qeriat ha-Torah by Women: A Halakhic Analysis” and “Congregational Dignity and Human Dignity: Women and Public Torah Reading.” Shapiro argues that there is sound halakhic basis for the argument that a woman may be called to the Torah for at least some aliya that are read by a man and that women, as well, may read the Torah in synagogues where there is a consensus that a woman’s Torah reading does not violate community standards of dignity. The only serious objection is the violation of kevod ha-tsibur, which should be regarded as a relative objection not universally applicable. Shapiro stresses that the practice of women’s aliya and Torah reading may not be attacked when taking place in self-selected groups, as opposed to an established synagogue, on the grounds that it violates a binding minhag (customary practice).

Sperber posits that the halakhic precedent of kevod ha-beriyot, individual dignity, must overcome kevod ha-tsibur, dignity of the community, when the concept of kevod ha-tsibur does not pertain in contemporary reality, as it might have in ancient and medieval times. It is the anachronistic nature of the halakhic concept of kevod ha-tsibur and the contemporary phenomenon of independent prayer communities that

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23 http://www.jofa.org/about.php/resources/partnership
allow for self-selecting groups of individuals to determine their minhagim that create an environment and provide opportunity for these partnership minyanim to proliferate.

Minyan Tehillah, a prayer community that attracts 50-150 attendees depending on the holiday or Shabbat, meets twice each month on Shabbat mornings, once each month on Friday nights and on various holidays. It was founded in Fall 2003 in Cambridge, MA by members of the Cambridge Jewish community who wanted to make their davening experience more meaningful and relevant and to maximize women’s ritual participation. The founders, who were attendees of the Harvard Hillel Orthodox minyan, had previously frequented two other partnership minyanim, Kehillat Shira Hadasha founded in 2002 in Jerusalem and Darkhei Noam founded a few months later in New York City.  The founders of Tehillah were feeling both alienated from the Orthodox minyan option in Cambridge as well as inspired by the opportunities for change and maximized participation that a partnership minyan could offer. This led to Tehillah’s predecessor, Shirat Miriam, which was founded in March 2002 in Cambridge. This minyan met on Friday nights with women leading kabalat Shabbat and men leading ma’ariv.

Both the halakhic literature and the rise of the partnership minyan movement provided a sense of integrity and legitimacy and allowed for the creation of Tehillah. In this context, founding members proceeded to form the minyan without much concern about whether or not this style of worship was justified. The early meetings of the

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28 Alanna Cooper, History and Future Prospects of Minyan Tehillah October 27, 2007.
29 ibid
minyan raised topics such as implementing the vision of running an Orthodox service with intentional *davening* that provided a public ritual role for women.\(^{30}\)

Creating and sustaining a new prayer community presents many challenges and tensions. These include the tension between members of varying opinions when it comes to decision-making as an Orthodox *minyan*. Since there is currently no rabbinic figure or *halakhic* advisor, disagreements about the pace of the service, the halakhic precedents for the inclusiveness of women in leading certain parts of the service and whether to sacrifice high quality *davening* and *layning* for inclusiveness and higher participation of members of the community are issues that are dealt with by members of the *minyan*’s leadership internally within the leadership board and as a community. The largest tension, perhaps, is straddling the line of being Orthodox, through proscribed gender roles, the use of a *mehitzah* and traditional Orthodox liturgy, and also being modern through boundary pushing and innovating an independent prayer community committed to a progressive ideology that incorporates feminist ideals within Modern Orthodoxy.

What makes Tehillah, as an independent minyan, innovative and distinctive compared to established synagogues is that it was founded as a grassroots initiative by very learned, visionary and passionate lay leaders and members of the Cambridge Jewish community. From the start, everyone was engaged as active participants in the discussions not as audience members of a synagogue.

The leadership structure of a board, committees and lay volunteers has been reformatted over time based on the feedback and experience of involved members of the *minyan*. For example, the board of the *minyan* used to consist of many members

\(^{30}\) ibid
without portfolio and minyan meetings were open to anyone who wanted to join. The board, however, was later reduced in size and members were given specific portfolios. These include co-chairs, ritual committee chair, finance committee chair, programming chair, strategic planning chair, and communications chair. The general community has also changed over time because as a community, Cambridge, MA is very transient. Despite this transience and the varying reasons why people choose to identify with Tehillah, there is a strong sense of commitment to the ideology and development of the minyan among its members.
The Sample

This section will outline how I decided to conduct my study, the process by which I interviewed and the changes I made to the methodology of research. Fifteen people, including six men and nine women, were interviewed for this paper. All participants share the following characteristics. They are paid members or participants of Minyan Tehillah, they were raised as Modern Orthodox Jews in the United States or Canada and are between 20 and 39 years of age. The participants in this study include founders, board members and people who no longer live in the community but used to attend the minyan and people who frequent the minyan occasionally but serve no leadership role. Some of those interviewed have only been attended Tehillah for the past few months whereas others have been attending since its founding in 2003.

Being raised as a Modern Orthodox Jew was crucial to this study because I wanted to understand what led people from such a community to Minyan Tehillah, which is affiliated with the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance. I also wanted to investigate how an Orthodox feminist can and should be educated. While some of the interviewees do not identify with Modern Orthodoxy today, all acknowledge having been raised in families with that orientation, outlook and affiliation.

Having been raised Modern Orthodox not only says something about their family’s affiliation but also the affiliation of the synagogues, day schools, college groups, summer camps, places of higher Jewish learning in Israel (i.e. seminaries and yeshivot) which were significant in their Jewish educational background and
experiences. These experiences were important to my study because they enabled me to better understand some of the formative experiences that shaped the interviewee’s religious and philosophical identity.

Initially, I had planned to limit my interviews to those who had attended co-ed Modern Orthodox day schools from grade one to twelve but I decided to broaden my sample to participants of Tehillah who may have elected or whose parents may have elected for them to leave the Modern Orthodox day school system for social or academic reasons. This did not mean that they were leaving the movement but were rather opting to find a place within the Jewish day school system that was more suitable for them socially or academically. This wasn’t necessarily directly related to their personal religious identity. It is possible that the shift to another educational institution may have played a significant role in shaping part of why they ended up at Tehillah. I also included one interviewee who attended a community, pluralistic day school and two who attended sex-segregated day schools because they still identified as Modern Orthodox within this context and were affiliated with other Modern Orthodox institutions excluding their day school.

The age of my sample was an important variable. According to the Emergent Jewish Communities and Their Participants study, 81% of those who attend independent minyanim, including partnership minyanim, are under the age of 40.\textsuperscript{31} It was important for me to have access to those who made up the majority of the minyan’s age bracket. Equally if not more significantly, I wanted to ensure that I was learning about people who were educated during the same time period when similarities may

\textsuperscript{31} Steven Cohen, Shawn Landres, Elie Kaunfer, Michelle Shain, \textit{Emergent Jewish Communities and Their Participants: Preliminary Findings from the 2007 National Spiritual Communities Study}. 

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have existed between the curricula, leadership and teaching staff of Modern Orthodox day schools.

As a member and active lay leader, both ritually and organizationally, within Minyan Tehillah, I was already familiar with many of the members and participants of the minyan and knew who to contact for my study. After generating names on my own, I then contacted one of the co-chairs of the minyan for suggestions about other suitable candidates who fit my criteria. I then sent an email to prospective interviewees explaining my research interest, goals and criteria and inviting them to participate in my study. My original goal was to interview between 8-10 people, half male and half female because both men and women play active roles within Tehillah. Both genders were also products of educational institutions and experiences within Modern Orthodoxy. I had very little trouble finding enough people to interview.
The Interview Protocol

The goal of the interview was to understand the chronological development of how my interviewees came to affiliate with Tehillah. I sought to understand their family life, their academic experiences and their perspectives on current trends in contemporary Jewish life such as feminism and Orthodoxy and partnership minyanim. Prior to conducting my first interview with members of Minyan Tehillah, I conducted two pilot interviews: one on the general topic of my study and one using the interview script. These pilot interviews acclimated me to the interview process, helped me focus on discussing what I felt was most pertinent to the study and helped me clarify the questions post pertinent to the study and gave me a feel for how long the interview would take. The pilot interviewees also led me to frame some new questions.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and took place in my home, the home of the interviewee or in the Harvard Hillel building. All interviews were conducted in private and each interviewee signed a consent form that acknowledged their understanding of the nature, purpose and goals of the interview and project and the confidentiality that I, as the researcher, affirmed. The interview questions topics included background/general information about the interviewee (including informal Jewish education), formal Jewish education, their thoughts on Modern Orthodoxy and feminism and involvement with partnership minyanim (including Minyan Tehillah). The questions were standardized for all interviewees. The full set of interview questions is included as Appendix A.
I took extensive notes during the interview and ended up with six to fourteen pages of transcripts per interviewee. After interviewing my fifteen study participants I had over 150 pages of notes which I reduced to about fifty pages. The process of data reduction included summarizing the pertinent information for each individual, including quotations that best illustrated the experiences and outlooks of the interviewees. I then took the redacted notes and filled out a one page, double-sided template that helped me organize the notes into the following categories: educational upbringing, formative experiences, current outlook on Modern Orthodoxy, feminism and partnership minyanim, and involvement with Tehillah. These categories reflected general themes derived from the interview data as well as trends that my interviewees shared with one another. See Appendix B. For example, there was no scripted question about Bat Mitzvah but this was a theme that arose among a significant number of my interviewees. Additionally, there was no scripted question about sentiments toward egalitarianism, yet this was also a pertinent topic that arose. The information in my thesis framework templates were subsequently transcribed into a word document for easier analysis. Pseudonyms were given to each interviewee to conceal their identity. See Appendix C. Significant themes and trends are addressed in the following chapters.
Chapter 1:
What Attracts People to Tehillah?

According to the 2008 Minyan Tehillah survey results, conducted by the minyan’s strategic planning chairperson, over 60% of Tehillah’s active members live more than a mile away from Etz Hayim Congregation where Minyan Tehillah rents space and meets on most Shabbat mornings. On some holidays and during the summer, the minyan meets at Harvard Hillel which, according to survey results, is a much more convenient and centralized location for meeting. With several other davening options available in Cambridge, although no other partnership minyanim, members of the minyan make a concerted effort to attend Tehillah by walking the distance to join a prayer community reflective of their values, ideal community and religious and social preferences.

Many of the fifteen people interviewed highlighted the reasons why Tehillah is an attractive prayer community for them. Interestingly, each interviewee expressed varying reasons reflecting trends that are apparent among affiliates of independent minyanim, such as the desire to participate in a spiritual, participatory and meaningful prayer environment that reflects egalitarianism or an increase in the participatory ritual roles available to women.32

While social reasons, for example, could be a pull factor for some, others are drawn by the ideological basis or the spiritual nature of the prayer environment. Some see, in Tehillah, the embodiment of their personal philosophy of Judaism. I found that people gave a number of different reasons for attending the Tehillah. While some

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32 Alanna Cooper, History and Future Prospects of Minyan Tehillah October 27, 2007.
individuals expressed more than one reason; others mainly emphasized one. Below I outline the different reasons, offering some illustrative quotes from the interview transcripts.

Ariella is a 28-year old graduate student. She initially didn’t attend Tehillah for social reasons but now finds that despite the transient nature of Cambridge, her closest friends are also members of the minyan. “It is a nice environment that attracts a variety of people who would probably daven elsewhere. It doesn’t just attract those who care about the halakhic mission statement. Cambridge is a transient community but Tehillah does a good job of building a real sense of a community despite its members constantly leaving.”

Samantha, a 27-year old professional, who was introduced to Tehillah years ago by her former roommate, won’t miss what she calls ‘a Tehillah week.’ The value she attaches to the minyan, of inclusive davening, is too precious to relinquish. Thus she makes the conscious effort to attend Tehillah each time the minyan meets.

I like feeling part of the minyan. I like feeling like it matters if I show up there at 9:30 AM because I count for a quorum there. I feel like I can take an active role. It’s nice to be able to read Haftarah and participate in the shul service. I find it very meaningful. People take davening seriously there and are not trying to rush through it. There is an effort to make it a beautiful davening.

Deborah, a 22-year old college student, was introduced to the minyan in her freshman year and would often join Tehillah for davening on Shabbat mornings instead of davening at the local Hillel. She finds Tehillah to be a warm, friendly community with great singing and a great ideology. For Nathan, a 28-year old graduate student, Tehillah provides an atmosphere of intellectuals who are serious about their spirituality and about being inclusive.
Brenda [Nathan’s fiancée] was going to school here [in Boston] and I had been coming up every other weekend and we would occasionally go to Tehillah because we were both searching for something outside of the traditional Orthodox model. We liked the equal involvement. It was immediately attractive to us.

Miriam, an academic in her late-30s, is one of the founders of Minyan Tehillah. For her it is a social scene but also a community through which she sees her values lived out. While some attempt to label prayer communities, including Tehillah, as “Conservative” or “Orthodox,” Miriam believes that this unique prayer community, which is neither Orthodox nor Conservative, responds perfectly to her religious outlook.

For my daughters, I like that there is a place where I feel comfortable. If we went to a straight-up Orthodox or Conservative shul I would say that this is a nice shul but we don’t really do things like that; but Tehillah is a place where we can say we do these things and feel very much aligned with the style of the minyan.

Yael, a 23-year old recent college graduate and young professional, finds that Tehillah provides an opportunity to be immersed in an environment that is spiritually-enriching, particularly during the high holidays, when davening at Tehillah is regarded by many as the most spiritual davening available in Cambridge.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur at Tehillah were the first times when davening on those holidays was meaningful for me. I loved the bouncing back and forth between the chazzan and chazzanit. Having spent the high holidays in Borough Park behind [a] one-way glass [mehitzah], this was huge for me. The year my brother was in Israel I didn’t want to leave my mom alone for Yom Tov but I had no reason to be in Cambridge since classes hadn’t started yet. I would walk in for davening and return home to be with my mother for meals. That’s how desperate I was to be davening with Tehillah.

For Yael, Tehillah isn’t only about the maximized spiritual davening but also about the maximized participation of women. “At Tehillah, if there wasn’t a tenth woman to lead then the minyan wouldn’t happen. Women at Tehillah can step up and take
responsibility.” This unique aspect of Tehillah incorporates both the traditionally understood *halakhic* and gender-sensitive definitions of the *minyan* and creates a sense of not only inclusion for women but also makes women, just as men, accountable for ensuring that prayer can commence on time. Women who take part in Tehillah not only feel as though that their presence is required to begin *davening* within a traditional prayer environment but also take part in this group effort, as a quorum of women, of arriving to *shul* on time.

Tamar, a 27-year old professional and board member of the *minyan*, feels that Tehillah provides a place where she and her peers can become actively involved in every aspect of the prayer community. Tamar says she feels invisible in standard Orthodox prayer environments but Tehillah provides an opportunity to become involved and engaged in both the ritual and organizational aspects of the minyan.

At other *shuls* I feel useless not leading anything or making announcements. I used to be content to sit in *shul* and *daven* but now I want something a little more. I like knowing that my friends are up there. People from my side of the *mehitzah* are up there leading *davening*. We have beautiful *daveners*. It feels very participatory like my high school. No one is running the show for us. It translates to real responsibility.

This isn’t only what draws people to Minyan Tehillah but is also part of the reason why independent minyanim are so attractive to people in Tamar’s social circle and age cohort.

These minyanim provide experiences believed to be unavailable in conventional congregations. This includes attaining positions of leadership within the *minyan* as well as opportunities to lead services. For students and young professionals who cannot afford to donate much money to institutionalized synagogues, involvement in Tehillah

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33 Steven Cohen, Shawn Landres, Elie Kaunfer, Michelle Shain, *Emergent Jewish Communities and Their Participants: Preliminary Findings from the 2007 National Spiritual Communities Study.*
and other independent minyanim, allow those with a passion and drive for leading the community to do so without necessarily having to be a generous donor. Their leadership and commitment comes purely out of their own passion and drive for the ideology and future of the community and not out of their pocketbook.

Independent minyanim generally straddle the line between what is understood to be Conservative (with elements of egalitarianism) and Orthodox (erecting a *mehitzah* and/or using traditional liturgy). Thus they attract people from diverse experiences and interpretations of Jewish religious expression who elect not to identify with a particular denomination of Judaism but value elements of different movements. 34 As Tamar explained, “I like the diversity of Tehillah which isn’t found in other partnership minyanim. I like that a lot of different people feel comfortable there.”

Minyan Tehillah fosters a unique social and religious environment. For many of its members who were raised in a Modern Orthodox context, it provides an unprecedented prayer community attracting young men and women. These individuals were previously exposed to prayer environments in their home community and school that were often limiting in terms of women’s participation, spirituality and leadership opportunities. These prayer environments also operated in contradistinction to Tehillah’s atmosphere that promotes spirituality along with maximized participation of both men and women. This transition from a more rigid, traditional prayer environment to one that reflects the trend of independent minyanim interests me and helped to motivate this study. What makes young adults who were raised in Orthodox homes and communities want to make a transition from the Jewish environment of their

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34 Steven Cohen, Shawn Landres, Elie Kaunfer, Michelle Shain, *Emergent Jewish Communities and Their Participants: Preliminary Findings from the 2007 National Spiritual Communities Study.*
upbringing to the environment of a partnership minyan? What background factors contribute to such a transition? Are there common trends among young adults who grew up in Orthodox Jewish educational environments but are now part of a strikingly different Jewish community from the one in which they were raised and educated? These are the questions that motivated my study.
Chapter 2: 
Strong Female Role Models

While participants’ formal Jewish education began within a day school context, their exposure to Jewish values and experiential Jewish learning began in the home. Reflecting on their experiences being raised in this context, interviewees highlighted the influence of strong women in their families of origin who have shaped their feminist and Orthodox identities. These women include mothers who played important leadership roles in the home, synagogue and community settings and sisters who both challenged and were sensitive to the place of women within a Modern Orthodox public ritual context.

Ariella’s mother, a ba’alat tshuva (returnee to religious Jewish practice), ran both the women’s megillah reading and Rosh Hodesh groups at her congregation. Her mother was also involved in founding the community day school in her community. Deborah, a 22-year old college student from New York, explained that her mother, who was raised Ultra-Orthodox but later identified with Modern Orthodoxy, was in the first class of Stern College’s Talmud program at Yeshiva University. As an obstetrician/gynecologist, she volunteers her time as a member of the chevreh kadisha (Jewish burial society) and was very active in founding a women’s tefillah group in their community. Deborah attributes her mother’s influence to her personal feminist identity. “My mother raised us in this way on purpose. This is what she felt passionately about – women being participatory - and that’s what she fought for her whole life.” Deborah was also influenced by the JOFA conferences she attended with her mother as a high school student.
Most of the people I interviewed were raised by mothers in prestigious professional positions as academics or physicians, founders or participants of women’s tefillah groups and volunteers in the Jewish community as founders of day schools or Emunah\textsuperscript{35} chapter presidents. Interviewees in their twenties spoke of the role their mothers played in Jewish communal activities, professions and Jewish ritual life more than those in their thirties. The latter often stated that their mothers had a weaker Jewish education or were not ritually-inclined. With a rise of attendance in both formal (i.e. day school) and informal (i.e. summer camp) Jewish education for Jews in the 1970s and 1980s (and Jewish women in particular), it is not surprising that mothers of 20-30 year olds would be motivated to engage in group prayer and learning since they had received and developed the tools to participate in such areas of Jewish life and were raising children in communities where these institutions existed, proliferated and were strengthened.\textsuperscript{36}

Those in their twenties discussed their mothers’ activities in both the secular professional and Jewish communal worlds whereas those in their thirties, who generally had families of their own, did not mention the role of their mothers or mentioned their mothers’ lack of participation and ritual engagement. Deborah’s mother, for example, was part of the first class at Stern College to study Talmud. Conversely, Alan and Cary, 30+ year old professionals, describe their respective mothers as having limited Jewish educational background, accepting gender roles and having little interest and empowerment to do Jewish learning on their own.

\textsuperscript{35} Emunah is the women’s division of the Bnei Akiva religious Zionist movement.
Four of the fifteen people interviewed mentioned the loss of a parent during their childhood, an experience that has had a strong impact on their identities as feminists. Samantha, who lost her mother to cancer at a young age, relayed a story about her mother that had a deep impact on her own feminist identity. “When my grandparents were honored at their synagogue, my mother gave a speech at the ceremony. It wasn’t common for women to speak publicly at that time in the synagogue. My father tells me that it was the best speech people had heard. My mother was an articulate and well-educated woman.” This anecdote not only reveals a story that is significant to Samantha’s mother’s memory but also conveys how Samantha’s mother was ahead of her time and how her memory, as an intelligent and articulate woman, influenced Samantha.

Nathan, who lost his father at a young age, also discusses his mother’s strong presence. Nathan’s father was a rabbi and his mother continued to enforce what his father dictated as custom and Jewish law in their home. “I always thought women should be involved because my mother was the role model.” Nathan’s mother now assumed the role of the patriarch and authority in his home. Although his mother was not involved with public Jewish rituals, his sisters and aunt were involved with women’s tefillah groups and Nathan was sensitive to this growing up. Conversely, Dov, a 24 year old graduate student, who also lost his father at a young age, relayed a different experience in terms of his mother’s role. “My mother isn’t ritually-oriented and never felt the need to recite Kiddush or make Hamotzi after my father died. I was always the one doing the rituals, either because she wanted to involve me in them or because she didn’t want to do them.”
Yael, who mentioned that her father passed away when she was a high school senior, speaks of her mother’s involvement with ritual matters. Yael’s mother taught her brother to read Torah for his Bar Mitzvah because her father was shy about it and her mother was very musical. Although her mother wanted to keep her tutoring private, Yael’s father made mention of it at the Bar Mitzvah. When describing her mother, Yael states that “If Orthodox women could be rabbis, my mother would have been one.” Thus, Yael was raised in a home where women, alongside men, were involved with Jewish ritual and had the knowledge and skills to not only practice but also to teach. Although her mother was ritually-involved, Yael’s father dominated the Passover holiday. “When he died, Pesach as I knew it didn’t exist anymore. It had disappeared. I was in Israel that year and my mother and brother went away to relatives. [The following year] I encouraged my mother to begin leading the seder because she was now the head of the family.” The example of Yael’s mother portrays a woman who, although steeped in Jewish knowledge and quite capable, is still somewhat hesitant in assuming the role of a Bar Mitzvah teacher or seder leader. Nevertheless, she does get involved in Jewish ritual within her family and provides both a role model and a partner of Yael for shaping Jewish ritual in their family and home following Yael’s father’s death.

Yael’s parents grew up in Brooklyn in a “black hat” community. Her mother is the daughter of a Hasidic rabbi originally from Poland. When visiting relatives from Borough Park, Yael knew that her clothing and appearance differed from theirs and she was trained to conform to their rules of modesty and not discuss her day school when in
the presence of her extended family. Despite this, Yael and her mother continued to respectfully adhere to their own approach to ritual.

We were at a relative’s Shabbat Kallah waiting for a male relative to come home and make Havdallah. My mother said that they were waiting for a man half of my mother’s age to make Havdallah. She was a feminist in both the secular and Jewish sense. My mom and I went into the kitchen and made Havdallah quietly by ourselves. We didn’t make a scene.

Through the examples of her mother’s respect for family members who are different from Yael and boldness in taking hold of Jewish ritual, Yael learned to be both sensitive to the very different Jewish culture in which her relatives were raised while adhering to the values and approach of her mother to Jewish ritual.

Aspects of pioneering, perseverance, knowledge and community dedication are prevalent in the aforementioned examples of strong maternal role models, particularly in the lives of minyan members in their 20s whose mothers were privileged to take advantage of educational and ritual opportunities available to them. These character traits are both memorable for those interviewed and have made a significant impact on their identities. While some interviewees, particularly those in their 30s, did not express that their mothers were seen as strong Jewish role models for them, they nevertheless witnessed female in strong leadership positions through the examples of their female classmates or other female relatives such as sisters and wives. Thus, it is possible to see that there may be generational differences between members of Tehillah raised a decade or more apart. This is not only based on the individuals but is reflective of society at the time and the Jewish educational institutions and trends present in North American society.
Chapter 3: What about Fathers?

Reflecting the trend of how those in their thirties see their mothers, Miriam too regarded her father instead of her mother as a Jewish role model. “In terms of what I felt at the time was real Judaism, such as davening and learning, my mother didn’t have anything to do with it. My mother isn’t literate or knowledgeable when it comes to Jewish texts and liturgy.” Rather it was her father who taught her how to read Torah although she never read publicly at her Bat Mitzvah.

The influence of fathers through childrearing and Jewish teaching transcends age. Fathers had a significant impact by engaging their daughters in Jewish ritual. In their interviews, Deborah, Ariella and Samantha each mentioned accompanying their fathers to synagogue on Shabbat. Other interviewees mentioned being included in leading the Passover seder along with their father and witnessing their fathers take an active role in cooking for Shabbat and baking challot. “Growing up, there were never any “women’s roles,” explains Deborah. “The women lit candles but my father cooked and baked challah for Shabbat and all of us daughters went to shul with him.”

Witnessing parity between the roles of mother and father or seeing a blurring between what is traditionally understood to be in the male domain or the female domain helped shape the identity and outlook of many of those interviewed.

Fathers have not only been role models for their daughters in terms of ritual involvement or assuming what were traditionally understood to be women’s roles, but have also been instrumental in their daughters’ Jewish education in the home. As Miriam has stated, it was her father who instructed her in Torah cantillation. For others,
their fathers have instructed them in Jewish text study and Jewish ritual as well as incorporating them, as mentioned above, in leading the Passover *seder* and attending the synagogue. Ariella explains, “My father emphasized text study and he served as my role model as an academic, teacher and community leader. At home, boys and girls had equal access to texts and knowledge. He felt strongly about educating his daughters.” The women who highlight the ways in which they were involved with Jewish ritual by the instruction by, encouragement and accompaniment of their fathers also speak of a special bond between themselves and their fathers and the positive Jewish memories that experiences studying and going to *shul* with their fathers have created. Additionally, these fathers have paid attention to their daughters and taken them seriously as girls and women who are capable of Jewish learning and participation in Jewish ritual.

For Nina, a 30+ year old professional, her father was instrumental in instructing her in Talmud. Attending an all-girls, right wing Orthodox day school, Nina was not exposed to Talmud study. Thus, her father spent time teaching her Talmud and connecting her to Jewish study. Nina in addition to Deborah and Samantha came from families of only girls so their fathers, who have a love for Jewish rituals, synagogue and learning, did not feel that their daughters should be exempt from these realms. The influence of fathers who deeply valued Jewish learning and ritual was not limited to the females interviewed. Peter, a 30+ year old professional, as well as Nathan, were raised by fathers in the rabbinate and were therefore raised in homes that were also steeped in Jewish tradition and ritual. As well, they were raised by fathers who, as rabbis, took Jewish ritual and observance very seriously. Nina is a daughter of and Deborah and
Yael are both granddaughters of Orthodox rabbis. Deborah mentioned that when growing up her parents encouraged her to learn Talmud with her grandfather, as both he and Deborah’s parents found Talmud study to be of great importance. The aforementioned individuals were raised by fathers and influenced by grandfathers who placed value on Jewish ritual observance and learning and the values that they imparted onto their children and grandchildren as a result indicates their status as parental role models.

The influence of fathers on those interviewed differs from the influence of mothers because rather than being in pioneering roles (i.e. studying Talmud or founding a minyan) they have incorporated their daughters in Jewish learning and Jewish ritual. Additionally, they have blurred gender lines in terms of which household chores fall under the responsibility of which gender. Several of those interviewed have also mentioned being raised by fathers in the rabbinate or being related to and influenced by grandfathers in the rabbinate, which is significant because rabbis (and particularly the rabbis mentioned by these interviewees) have taken responsibility in educating their children or grandchildren and have not made a distinction between those male and female.
Another trend that emerged in my research is the centrality of the Bat Mitzvah ceremony. Two-thirds of the women interviewed spoke of their Bat Mitzvah ceremony as a central experience in their Jewish education and upbringing. This is not surprising because in the Orthodox world the Bat Mitzvah ceremony has taken on new meaning as a lifecycle event for Modern Orthodox women.37 In the mid-20th century, a Bat Mitzvah ceremony in the Orthodox world was virtually unheard of. Today it not only happens in the liberal streams of Judaism that recognize such milestones in the life of a female but it also takes place in the Modern Orthodox world where the Bat Mitzvah girl might read Torah or Haftarah and/or deliver a dvar Torah either in all-women or in mixed gender services38. These girls are also being empowered to commit to Talmud Torah (serious Jewish learning) as preparation for their Bat Mitzvah during the year leading up to it. Unlike among many liberal Jews, the Bat Mitzvah does not symbolize the culmination of Jewish learning or Hebrew school education but is rather a significant component of their educational experience. They may spend months preparing for their Bat Mitzvah by learning Jewish texts about the holiday of Tu B’Shvat or Purim and discuss what they learned at their Bat Mitzvah ceremony, which may coincide with these holidays.39

Ariella’s Bat Mitzvah was, for her, a formative experience. She learned the laws of lashon harah (evil speech), which was the theme of her Torah portion, with the rabbi

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one year prior to her Bat Mitzvah. After Shabbat services, she delivered a shiur to the congregation, which she said was groundbreaking at the time. Despite the public role she assumed at her Bat Mitzvah by teaching her congregation, she did this from the men’s section of the synagogue. “There was something so flawed about going into the men’s section.” Ariella had entered the men’s section to deliver a shiur (learning session) at her Bat Mitzvah the ceremony and day that marked her responsibility as an adult Jewish woman. After that day, however, she was banished to the women’s section whereas she had previously sat with her father in shul (synagogue). Despite the public role she had in marking her Bat Mitzvah, in her reflection of the occasion, she is critical of the experience.

It was totally crazy, as a twelve year old having a Bat Mitzvah, engaged in text and not once touching a sefer Torah or engaging in a tactile way at my Bat Mitzvah. The meaningful part was learning; application and ritual were lacking at my Bat Mitzvah.

Miriam also celebrated her Bat Mitzvah by delivering a d’var Torah to invited relatives and friends at her party. Although she actively engages in the ritual opportunities afforded to women at Tehillah today, she accepted the role she was given as a Bat Mitzvah. “I was happy and proud to have a Bat Mitzvah that way and may have had disdain for friends who had to read from the Torah just like boys.” In hindsight, Miriam realizes how disenfranchising it was to not be able to read Torah at her Bat Mitzvah, especially given the fact that she was taught to read Torah.

Nina also delivered a d’var Torah at her Bat Mitzvah party but it bothered her that girls were total after-thoughts. Although she came from a family of all daughters, she knew that not as much money was spent on a Bat Mitzvah as is spent on a Bar Mitzvah. “The Bar Mitzvah was the bigger deal,” she explained.
Women who marked the occasion of their Bat Mitzvah can be divided into two categories: those who delivered a d’var Torah and had a party and those who participated in a women’s tefillah group Bat Mitzvah experience where they read from the Torah and lead services. Deborah, whose mother founded a women’s tefillah group in New York, read Torah and delivered a speech at the tefillah group in honor of her Bat Mitzvah. Rachel, a 22 year-old college student from New York, also marked her Bat Mitzvah in a women’s tefillah group, founded by her mother. In the Modern Orthodox world, the phenomenon of marking a Bat Mitzvah through public ritual and Torah reading has been a growing trend. Many of the women in their late 20s or 30s who were interviewed speak of marking their Bat Mitzvah with a party and delivery of a d’var Torah. On the other hand, women in their early to mid-20s marked this occasion with public ritual involvement.

Tamar, like Deborah and Rachel, also had a women’s tefillah group Bat Mitzvah and like Ariella, Nina and Miriam, she too delivered a d’var Torah to the congregation. “I studied for a long time with my neighbor who was a role model for me. On Shabbat I led the davening and my father came in just for my Torah reading. I gave a d’var Torah in the main sanctuary from the bimah after davening.” Although these women currently make the individual commitment to participate in a prayer community that maximizes the ritual participation of women, at the Bat Mitzvah age, they were influenced by their mothers’ involvement in women’s tefillah groups influenced them as well as their mothers’ desire to ensure that their daughters marked this lifecycle event in an appropriate manner. Tamar, who read Torah at her Bat
Mitzvah, was initially influenced by her mother but came to believe that women’s prayer groups were less about spirituality and more about proving something.

I felt I really had a Bat Mitzvah because I learned something. It was my mother’s idea for me to have a Bat Mitzvah and not my own. After my Bat Mitzvah I went once or twice a year to layn at a women’s tefillah service but I didn’t like it anymore. The women were very feminist and wore talitot. My father would make derogatory comments and not take what they were doing seriously. I felt that women’s tefillah groups were less spiritually motivated and more motivated by the philosophy ‘we can do it.’ I wanted to daven in the main sanctuary because the chazzanim [there] were great.

Although the women’s tefillah group Bat Mitzvah experience may have unwittingly planted the seed for Tamar’s later involvement with Tehillah, the prayer experience they afforded was not something she desired to be part of at the time.

Yael, whose mother introduced her to the women’s tefillah group Bat Mitzvah, chose to deliver a d’var Torah at a party and not to participate in this kind of ritual to mark the lifecycle event. “I realized it wouldn’t represent what it means to be a Jewish adult because that wasn’t what I was going to be doing as a Jewish adult. Being a Jewish adult for a woman meant a lifetime of learning and baking challah.” Yael’s foresight acknowledges that she understood the opportunities this event would afford her and the limitations that still existed for her as a Jewish woman. Her attitude reflects that of Ariella who also understood the event leading to the limitations of being Bat Mitzvah, which include sitting apart from men during services, not engaging in ritual matters (such as touching a Torah scroll) but instead accessing Jewish learning or more cynically speaking, assuming a stereotypical gender role such as baking challah.

For Alan, a professional in his thirties, and Zev, a 24 year-old professional, the experience of women in Jewish ritual hits home. Both of them mention the experience of their sisters simultaneously engaging in Jewish ritual while exhibiting struggles as
women growing up in a Modern Orthodox context with egalitarian tendencies. Zev’s sister, who he describes as being a strong leader and student, participated in a women’s tefillah group mincha service for her Bat Mitzvah. Perhaps because of this exposure she became frustrated with the existing hindrances in the Orthodox world that prevented her from engaging in rituals on an equal footing with her male counterparts.

My sister went to seminary and was hardcore… She knew the halakhot and would wear sweatpants and had no problem wearing pants… She suddenly realized a concrete ceiling that she was running into. Not even a glass ceiling. She went through a disenfranchised period and now found a good place for herself at egalitarian minyanim. She’s thankful that she has found that. There was a point when she came home and would have a discussion [about women’s participation] and would cry. It’s not like my parents forbade her. It’s anguishing for people like her. We’re losing out on having her lead davening and the efforts she pours into everything she does. She’s highly motivated.

Alan’s sister also experienced frustration as a learned woman who recognized how limiting her role in the Orthodox world would be.

My older sister was serious about learning and angry about the role of women in Orthodoxy. I can’t stress that enough. How angry she was! She resented all men because of it, even the non-Jewish ones. That’s something significant in terms of my experience with women and Orthodoxy, experiencing my older sister’s frustration and anger with it.

Both Alan and Zev, exposed to their sisters’ frustrations developed sensitivity to the attitude and role of women in conventional Modern Orthodoxy. They both mention the high level of learning and the seriousness with which their sisters approached Talmud Torah which helps explain the frustrations they felt at being barred from full access to Jewish ritual experiences. Alan and Zev had the same day school education as their sisters. Perhaps studying in a co-ed environment and witnessing differences between the sexes in terms of access to ritual and knowledge has shaped their consciousness and
their eventual understanding that there is room in the *halakhic* system and social structures to enhance the experience of women.⁴⁰

I wanted to explore that possibility by learning more about my interviewees’ formal Jewish education. What and how did their formal day school education contribute to their current sensibilities? What is the relationship between their commitment to maximizing inclusiveness and increasing women’s ritual participation in Minyan Tehillah and their experiences in day school, especially their exposure to males and females as equals in the Jewish studies classroom? (How) do the co-ed environments contribute to sensitivity between the sexes?

“I considered myself a feminist early on at the beginning of high school. In high school people were treated equally; everyone learned gemarah. The notion of nashim datan kala (women are of weak minds) was ridiculous. Girls were brighter and more knowledgeable than [some] guys. Girls out-learned guys in high school.”

- Nathan, 28 year old graduate student

One of the marked differences between Modern Orthodox and more right-wing Orthodox day schools in North America is the value given to secular or general studies and the affordances of the co-educational school environment. While most of the interviewees attended Modern Orthodox day schools with co-ed classes for all subjects, some attended day schools with gender-segregated Judaic Studies classes, whereas the minority of those interviewed attended day schools that were completed gender-segregated.

The influence of co-ed Judaic studies classes is relevant to this study because exposure to Jewish texts, particularly Talmud, was limited for women for much of Jewish history and for much of the 20th century. Once students are not only exposed to each other in Modern Orthodox day schools but are also exposed to Jewish classical texts together, they gain an appreciation for each other as serious students of the text. This is an important factor to consider when studying the backgrounds of men and women active in partnership minyanim who were raised in a Modern Orthodox world where women were equal partners in Jewish education but were relegated to a place behind a mehitzah during prayer services both at day school and in their home congregations.
Nathan attended a Jewish day school and summer camp in New York that focused on text study. In middle school, Judaic studies classes went from being co-ed to gender-segregated. Despite this, Nathan explained that “Girls learned the same material as boys but not in co-ed classes. Boys and girls studied together and I felt that girls knew more than some of the boys did and outsmarted them.” He goes on to explain that girls and boys studied together for tests. Thus, although the classes were divided by gender, the same material was taught, which enabled male and female students to study together.

Dov, having attended a yeshiva day school with gender-segregated Jewish Studies classes, noted that co-ed classes were always more in his comfort zone. In high school, Dov moved to a new city and began attending a pluralistic day school. “It was a difficult adjustment to the pluralistic high school because my political and religious ideology didn’t fit into that of the majority of his classmates. There I felt like a fish out of water.” Despite co-ed Jewish studies classes that came along with his new school, Dov had many adjustments to make, not just because of his classmates’ ideological differences but because of the nature of Jewish studies being taught in this environment.

The pluralistic high school taught Jewish studies in a more scholarly way and was less traditional. In 11th grade there was an emphasis on commentators. I had to adjust my method of study because of the differences between the scholarly learning of Jewish studies at the pluralistic high school versus the method of study at the yeshiva. I would augment midrashic stories into the Humash lessons because that is how I learned Humash.

To Dov’s surprise, he learned that many of the midrashim taught at his yeshiva day school were not in fact part of the Torah but were rather part of Rabbinic Literature. He
was therefore grappling both with getting to know students of different beliefs and with a different style of Judaic Studies curriculum.

Yael also attended a Modern Orthodox day school through 8th grade before switching to the same pluralistic Jewish high school as Dov. She, however, found the adjustment to a pluralistic day school refreshing. Referring to her co-ed Modern Orthodox elementary school she states:

I felt that I wasn’t in a place that made Judaism come alive. I felt that the school lacked vision. In 8th grade I was socially unhappy so my parents switched me to the pluralistic day school. There I began to learn about the different paths to God and how Judaism is so much richer for its diversity because so many denominations can be learning from each other.

This pluralistic day school education gave Yael the opportunity to think about Jewish values, pluralism and Jewish philosophy. Although her Modern Orthodox day school education provided her with the foundation of her identity, she no longer connects with it directly. “Even if I don’t keep particular halakhot I know the technicalities of them.”

At her Modern Orthodox school, Jewish Studies were very text-based and thorough. There were triple the number of Talmud periods than at her pluralistic day school. There students learned the methodology and about the different voices in the Talmud. Senior year was the most controversial for Yael because of the exposure to biblical criticism which changed the way she thought about Judaism. As she explains,

I thought one way at the beginning and left the class buying into documentary hypothesis and biblical criticism. I was confused when I finished the class. When I went off to Israel for the year I had a moment of realization. A rabbi came to substitute our class from a religious seminary and mentioned an Orthodox take on the Bible and then I realized that I didn’t agree with it. It was somewhat of an existential crisis in Judaism.
Dov and Yael were both challenged in their new day school environment in which they found themselves by learning new ways of thinking and new skills as well as by meeting people who differed from themselves in their Jewish orientations.

Alan and Zev, who attended the same co-educational Modern Orthodox day school, noted that the co-ed nature of both Jewish and general studies classes and the equal value placed on both was a “big deal.” While Alan explained that his school was “flawed” because it did not stress the beauty of Judaism or provide creative venues for expression. Zev felt that the curriculum provided him with a traditional education, strong text skills and a Jewish foundation. He also gave his perspective on the school’s unique approach to co-education.

My school had a strong emphasis on Torah U’Maddah (both Jewish and secular learning). Classes were entirely integrated except for gym class. In Israel at Yeshiva and in college I realized this was a unique situation… My hevrutah (learning partner) in my senior year of high school was a girl and I didn’t think anything of it. It never struck me as much of a hiddush (revelation) that men and women were learning together.

Learning with a hevrutah of the opposite sex provided Zev with the opportunity to study one-on-one with a female student. Not all students from co-ed Modern Orthodox day schools studied with a hevrutah of the opposite sex.

Deborah attended two different Modern Orthodox day schools, both of which she describes as being “very dogmatic.” There was little opportunity to question despite the range of students’ observances. But it was a top school known for stellar general and Jewish studies taught in co-ed classes.

There was never a question of boys and girls not learning together. I was always in classes with boys. Hevrutot could have been co-ed but instinctively people gravitated toward their best friends and chose same-sex hevrutot.
Co-ed learning and the interaction between the sexes were not limited to instruction or *hevrutah* time. Students also engaged in debate and dialogue outside the formal framework of the classroom. Rachel, one of Deborah’s classmates, explained that she would discuss *halakha* and particularly women and *halakha* with her male classmates, conveying her opinions which were more often criticized by her female classmates than her male ones.

Tamar also attended a co-educational Modern Orthodox day school through part of high school at which point she switched to an all-girls school.

I became more religious and thought that I shouldn’t be wearing pants and that I should be learning more. Those things became important for me and I felt distant from my friends at school. I felt more religious than everyone else and would bash my school for not taking Jewish studies more seriously. So I switched from a co-ed to an all-girls high school and was happy with the switch. I got involved with extra-curricular activities and also loved the Jewish studies classes. Before I struggled with my religiosity but after the switch I felt that people were more similar to me.

At Tamar’s co-ed day school the curriculum was equal for both male and female students, with all students learning *Mishnah* in grades five and six and Talmud in grades seven and eight. The extra-curricular options available to boys and girls indicated that the school still maintained that there was a significant contrast between the genders. “In fifth grade the boys took a class on *layning* [Torah cantillation] and the girls took Israeli dance. The division seemed weird at the time.” Pigeonholing students at a malleable age into traditional gender roles not only perpetuated assumptions and stereotypes but also prohibited them from engaging in both educational and recreational activities that would be beneficial for both sexes. As Blu Greenberg writes in *Gender Issues in Jewish Day Schools*:
Certainly the experience of women’s tefillah ought to be a standard feature in Orthodox day schools, including teaching girls how to layn. Trop isn’t only a liturgical device, it is essentially another commentary on the Torah and girls should not be deprived of it.41

Tamar’s anecdote about the extracurricular activities in her elementary day school provides an example of not only gender stereotyping but also of depriving each gender of opportunities to learn and grow by acquiring different skills. Tamar’s male classmates were deprived from taking Israeli dance and from the opportunity for kinesthetic learning. For Tamar and her female classmates, they were deprived from not only learning how to layn but also, as Greenberg writes, they were deprived learning another way of understanding the Torah.

Nina, who attended an Orthodox all-girls day school, said that her educational experience was somewhat positive because her Jewish literacy is stronger than those from a non-Orthodox background. She also believes things would have been harder for her at a co-ed school. “Even though I went to an all-girls school in some ways I didn’t always feel as oppressed as if I went to a co-ed school because there was nothing to compare my experiences to. There was no minyan.” Within a same-sex context, there was no gender hierarchy and no special access that her male counterparts were entitled to within Jewish ritual.

In Nina’s all-girls school, the Jewish Studies curriculum focused on davening and holiday practices. In high school there was a focus on Tanakh and halakha that wasn’t very text-based. “I learned a lot in elementary school and knew facts but not critical thinking. Too many negatives were focused on. ‘We don’t do this. We don’t do that’.” Nina was frustrated by the limited opportunities to engage in intellectual

41 Harry Brod and Blu Greenberg, Gender Equality and Gender Distinctiveness: A Challenge to Jewish Day School Education. Women's Studies Program, Brandeis University.
challenges. She was jealous of boys who were allowed to do things from which she was exempt, including public ritual opportunities and access to Jewish learning. Not only did this include public ritual opportunities but also access to Jewish learning. “I was frustrated. I was more of a thinker and felt oppressed. I thought about why we weren’t learning Talmud.”

While Nina was deprived of learning Talmud within the context of her day school’s curriculum she studied it on her own with her father and with a teacher from the school. Many other women who graduated from co-ed Modern Orthodox day schools were given that opportunity at school. At Samantha’s day school, for example, all the text-based classes were gender-segregated. While all students learned the same tractates of Talmud, male students had a double period of Talmud.

Deborah and Rachel attended the same co-ed Modern Orthodox day school. Talmud was Deborah’s favorite class and by participating in a more advanced track of Judaic studies, she sometimes had up to three hours of Talmud class daily. Rachel was also in a more advanced track of Judaic studies which influenced her greatly. “I didn’t find it scary at all. I could easily understand its structure.” These students, who were immersed in top-level Talmud classes throughout day school, found the subject matter enjoyable to learn and easy to comprehend. This, coupled with limitless opportunities they had in an egalitarian learning environment, proved to be very empowering for them as female students of Talmud.

Miriam, who attended both traditional and non-denominational community day schools, learned Toshbah thematically. “We would study some topic and then they would take us through the Mishnah and Talmud. I was intrigued by the logic of the
Talmud and really interested in that class intellectually.” Although Miriam did not learn the structure, history and importance of the Talmud at school, she did learn this from her synagogue rabbi and that further developed her understanding and fascination with the text.

While the aforementioned individuals all had varying experiences with the Judaic studies curriculum and text study at their day schools, they nevertheless gained access to the textual material and could reflect both critically and often positively on their learning experiences. For most of those interviewed, gender posed no limit to them or their classmates in terms of their access to textual knowledge. Those who did feel limited took advantage of other opportunities to complete their Jewish learning by studying with parents or rabbis. Thus, teachers, as well as texts, served as important catalysts in transmitting Jewish knowledge and shaping Jewish sensibilities.

Abraham Joshua Heschel argues, in his essay *Jewish Education* in *The Insecurity of Freedom*, “What we need more than anything else is not textbooks but text people. It is the personality of the teacher which is the text that the pupils read; the text that they will never forget.”42 Besides the co-ed environments which offered equal access to texts, we need to pay attention to those who did the instructing. In the next chapter, I explore the influence of teachers.

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A common theme throughout all my interviews was the gender stratification of the teachers. In every day school example (except for Tamar’s all-girls Modern Orthodox day school), all Talmud teachers were male and all Hebrew and Tanakh teachers were generally female. Thus, Jewish law classes, which were seen for the most part as being the most important subject matter within Jewish studies, were not instructed by females in any of the co-ed Modern Orthodox schools in this study. Granted that the youngest interviewees are four years out of high school, this is still an interesting phenomenon. If Talmud is seen as the most important subject matter in Modern Orthodox day schools today, then that affects a phenomenon that exists in many schools – both Jewish and secular – with regard to positions of leadership such as principals and heads of administration. Typically and stereotypically heads of school are male and Talmud teachers are male. The implication of this may be that men are still in top level teaching positions in the co-ed Modern Orthodox day school system, despite the number of female teachers in the Jewish studies department. It may also reflect the reality that women in the Orthodox world are not rabbis and many Talmud teachers do have rabbinic ordination or are required to in order to teach in these schools.

Deborah notes that she was very close with her Talmud teachers. Only recently, she remarks, have they begun hiring women to teach Talmud but not when she was in school. “No day schools I knew of at the time hired female Talmud teachers.” Although Talmud teachers were male, the men and women I interviewed related well to their
Talmud teachers. Both Rachel and Miriam found their respective Talmud teachers to be personally influential. Miriam notes that “They taught in an interesting, critical way at the time and I was stimulated by their classes.”

Samantha’s day school did not have a lot of teachers willing to teach girls Talmud except for one Talmud teacher. Since he was the sole teacher available to the female students, those students who did not mesh with him chose a different rabbinic literature class to take. Samantha, however, enjoyed his class and viewed him as her role model because his views on Modern Orthodoxy and women’s education were compatible with hers. Others, such as Cary, also appreciated the views of his teachers, particularly the ‘Judaism’ class teacher who would get students thinking about topics such as free will and would initiate discussions that didn’t necessarily conform to Orthodoxy.

In her interview, Nina also mentioned both a rabbi and teacher who were influential for her. “There was a specific teacher in high school whom I worked with to study Talmud. He would have open conversations with me and teach me anything.” Finding a teacher to quench her intellectual thirst at her high school was one redeeming part of her education there. She also mentioned that her rabbi was open to women studying and was willing to having conversations about the struggles of women in the Orthodox world. Still the majority of Nina’s experiences with male teachers were not so redeeming. “I hated the male teachers. They were so insulting and condescending and we knew they wouldn’t teach boys the same way. They talked down to us as if we were idiots.” Nina’s exposure to more open-minded teachers who catered to her
intellectual curiosity is juxtaposed with those teachers who did not cater to her potential and who treated her classmates with less respect than her male counterparts.

Tamar, on the other hand, found that the teachers in her all-girls Modern Orthodox day school were very respectful. “Teachers treated students as adults and did not focus on just getting good grades. There was a focus on Torah lishmah (learning for the sake of learning) and an emphasis on learning. There were no boys to hog the attention so it felt good to be taken seriously as a female learner.” Having been taken seriously she was also able to learn a lot from this teacher. Tamar notes that her Talmud teacher was the first teacher to really help her understand Talmud.

The relationships between students and their teachers of either gender differed greatly. For example, Nina’s relationship with one of her female teachers was very positive. “Out of the female teachers I really only remember having one good one. She was a young woman who taught us Navi (Prophetic Literature) in high school. She had a MA from Yeshiva University in Tanakh or Jewish History. She was more educated. You could tell from the way she taught.” Despite this positive relationship with one female teacher who Nina admires for her educational credentials, she also mentions one teacher as the exception to the lack of female Halakha teachers in her school. “Women never taught Halakha though, only Tanakh except for 12th grade taharat mishpacha (family purity laws). Instead of a final we took a Tay-Sachs blood test.” Instead of this teacher presented her class with a challenging final project or exam to test their skills, she had them take a blood test to detect possible carrier status for a genetic disease prevalent in the Ashkenazi Jewish community. The subject matter and halakhot taught in this course were therefore belittled and minimized from an academic perspective and
were made to appear as only relevant in their lives as Jewish mothers and not as students interested in understanding halakha from an intellectual perspective.

Samantha contrasts two of her female teachers. One organized a women’s megillah reading at school for Purim for the female students. “It was the first time I was involved with something like that. I enjoyed it because women are active in the Purim story.” This teacher empowered her female students by expressing the importance of their megillah reading so that they both prepared their chapters seriously and understood the importance of engaging in Jewish ritual that they felt they had ownership of as women. Samantha also talks about another female teacher with whom she did not get along who emphasized memorization in her Jewish studies classes. “I wanted to learn skills, not how to memorize.” Like Nina, Samantha was motivated by the intellectual curiosity and the thirst for being challenged and doing serious learning. When they were not challenged, they became disgruntled with their experiences in their Jewish Studies classes. For women like Deborah and Rachel who were immersed in engaging and challenging Talmud classes, they benefited greatly not only from the teachers with whom they studied but also from the stimulating environment of the top level Talmud and Judaic studies classes.

Alan and Zev both stated that the teachers at their school were more right-wing than themselves and the school’s philosophy. While these teachers taught Talmud to women in co-ed classes they did not embrace the secular world and the part of the school philosophy that valued secular education. Regarding the gender divide between the teachers, Zev notes “At school, teachers were more right-wing than me. Talmud teachers were always male and Bible teachers were always female. This divide
bothered me. I felt teachers weren’t as progressive as my family and synagogue environment. There was a discrepancy there.”

Whether it was the consciousness of the gender divide between teachers and their subject matter or the disappointment in some cases and satisfaction in others that students had with their learning environment and teachers, most of those interviewed noted the importance of their experiences engaging with texts and teachers as influencing their identity and their position on a range of topics such as the role of women, text study, ritual engagement and Modern Orthodoxy.
Chapter 7:
Va’Ani Tefilati: The Experience of Prayer

“There was never a distinction between boys and girls in terms of Jewish practice except for davening but I never thought about that.”

- Deborah, 22 year-old college student

Just as men monopolized the teaching of Talmud in the co-ed Modern Orthodox and community day schools mentioned by the interviewees, so too did they monopolize the role within public prayer in the Orthodox minyanim of community day schools and certainly in the Modern Orthodox schools. Except for gender-segregated tefillah for pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah age students where male and female students prayed separately and male and female shlichei tzibbur (prayer leaders) had similar responsibilities, prayer in the middle and high school years was conducted in a traditional Orthodox environment but both male and female students were obliged to attend according to school policy.

In the co-ed middle schools that did segregate male and female students for their Jewish Studies classes, male and female students also stopped davening separately according to their gender. Rather, they joined together, as post-B’nai Mitzvah, to pray in a minyan. In most co-ed cases, male and female students were segregated for tefilah even though they studied together in the same classroom. Sometimes the segregation occurred because the prayer space, such as the Beit Midrash (study hall), may have not been large enough to accommodate all students. Then, at post Bar/Bat Mitzvah age, they were segregated for their studies (due to reasons of modesty) but prayed together in the same minyan without the participation of girls.
Alan notes that prayer at his school took place three times a day. Because his friends took it seriously, he found it to be a positive social experience. “It was straight-up davening with no role for women. There were several minyanim with mixed ages and grades but there was no attempt to include women in Jewish ritual.” While this is typical for most of the co-ed Modern Orthodox schools, there were attempts to include women in some elements of ritual. For example, at Samantha’s school, where mandatory prayer was led solely by male students, women were not included during tefillah but were included in other aspects of Jewish ritual such as at the all-women’s megillah reading on Purim.

There was a women’s megillah reading on Purim which was my first time being involved in anything like that. When I learned to read megillah I was given a tape and I memorized my half of the perek. I didn’t think of it in a larger context to apply that to davening. It wasn’t my frame of reference at that point. There were women’s assemblies on Rosh Hodesh but I don’t remember if there was anything Tefillah-related.

Samantha, who positively responded to her involvement in such an activity, notes that others felt positively about this expression of women’s ownership of Jewish ritual. “There was a positive response from girls for [the women’s] megillah reading. Girls were active in it and some of their moms came and other girls from the school came as well.”

Although this opportunity to engage the female students in ritual participation took place annually, students and their mothers were very enthusiastic. The fact that teachers at Samantha’s school promoted the importance of this occasion is also significant because it indicates that this was something endorsed by the school as acceptable for women to take ownership of.
Miriam, who chose to attend the Orthodox minyan option at her community day school which offered multiple prayer options, notes that at the time she enjoyed praying there but in hindsight realizes how difficult an experience this was for her.

In retrospect when looking back at the girl I was, it is so alienating to have looked over at the other side at the guys running the service. A lot of the pain comes from the fact that something inside of me was blocking the disconnection and discomfort and in retrospect I am realizing what a difficult experience it was.

While she could have attended a minyan that had increased participation for women, she chose to pray with her classmates in an environment that reflected the prayer setting of her home community. Despite the cognitive dissonance at the time, she was able to pray in that setting; however she regrets the experience today as an Orthodox feminist.

For Yael, who initially attended a co-ed Modern Orthodox day school but switched to a pluralistic Jewish high school, davening was initially gender-segregated and took place in the classroom but by middle school, students were divided into different minyanim. “I wanted to go to a room to daven where I had friends. I never expected much out of davening. It was never very ‘wow.’” Despite her apathy toward her earlier tefilah experience, she wanted to kiss the Torah when it was taken around even though no girls did so.

Once Yael started studying at the pluralistic Jewish high school and began to take ownership of her tefilah experience, it became much more significant. Each student chose the minyan to which s/he wanted to go. Yael attended the mehitzah minyan (as it was called) and notes that those who ran the minyan made it as liberal as possible, such that the Torah was passed through the women’s section. Yael and a friend of hers made it their role to pass the Torah through the women’s section. “That was the first time I held a sefer Torah. It was very exciting.” Yael, who previously
mentions her love for and attachment to Jewish ritual, found a place for herself within the *mehitzah minyan* at her high school. Given the options at that time, she chose to identify with Modern Orthodoxy although she found a way to make *tefillah* personally meaningful and to become personally involved in the *minyan*.

I wanted to show that I was the one who defended Orthodoxy and said that it doesn’t discriminate against women but that there were just different roles for us. I would find guys to come to *mincha*. That was my role even though I didn’t count in the *minyan*. I was also involved with clubs at school so it’s good that the *minyan* wasn’t where I was leading but if I was a guy I would have probably been *gabbai* of the *minyan*.

Although Yael was active in her prayer community at school, there was a glass ceiling in place in terms of how involved she could actually become. Like Yael, several male interviewees became very involved with their *minyanim* at their schools and in their home congregations. They also thought critically about these prayer environments.

Because he had a good voice, Zev led services at his school, synagogue and Hillel on his university campus. He notes that boys started leading *tefilot* as early as 5th grade. Although he was involved with service leading at his various *minyanim*, he generally did not pray at school. Instead he chose to join the weekday prayer community at his home congregation. “Most people had negative experiences with prayer at school. Teachers were always policing.” For Zev, a serious prayer environment was important. At school he experienced teachers creating a strict environment for *tefilot*. Since he didn’t enjoy getting to school early for *tefilah*, he chose to pray at his home congregation and had his rabbi send a note to the school verifying that Zev was indeed attending *minyan* there.

Nathan also served as *gabbai* and *shaliach tzibbur* in the youth *minyan* at his synagogue and at his school where prayer was separated by gender until Bar Mitzvah.
age after which his classmates prayed in a traditional Orthodox minyan with the boys leading. Dov also was involved with his student minyan and notes that he enjoyed prayers more when he was able to get involved. Unlike Yael, once Dov switched from an Orthodox day school to a pluralistic Jewish high school, his interest in playing an active role in the prayer community diminished. “I wasn’t so into the mehitzah option so I would sit at the back of the room with my tefilin on and read, though I did get into the davening toward the end of high school.” Although students had access to a variety of prayer options, Dov chose to pray at the mehitzah minyan but also attended other prayer options such as the egalitarian minyan and a discussion group in lieu of a prayer service.

Rachel’s high school also had options for prayer services including the standard Orthodox service and a special women’s minyan that she ran. Rachel notes that in 9th grade, tefilah wasn’t something she wanted to get involved with but later she made it something very special. Despite her involvement with women’s tefilah at her day school, she began to daven away from her school minyan at a nearby Conservative congregation because toward the end of high school she decided to wear tefilin which she could not do at school.

Tamar mentions girls who wore tefilin and talitot at her co-ed Modern Orthodox day school’s minyan which was permitted. “I don’t know what fight they had to go up against. Socially, the tefilin were stigmatizing. Boys thought it was weird.” Although there was a stigma against women wearing ritual objects during prayer, Tamar notes that boys would show affection to girls by giving them their tefilin to wear at the end of the
davening. These examples of students engaging with ritual objects are out of the ordinary model of prescribed gender roles.

Tamar had experienced the gamut of differences within the minyanim at her day schools. In elementary school davening was led separately by male and female students. In upper elementary grades and in high school, davening was done traditionally by grade level. “Everything was led by men, but it wasn’t weird for girls to be getting up and giving divrei Torah around the time of their Bat Mitzvah. Women were certainly not invisible.” For example, the Torah scroll was brought close enough to the girls’ side for them to kiss it and to see what was happening. Although she acknowledges the importance of the Torah being taken to the girls’ side of the mehitzah she also notes how the privacy of the “girls-only” space was infringed upon. Tamar regarded her side of the mehitzah as a sacred, “girls-only” space. Thus, she was bothered when the (male) principal would invade her space and walk into the girls’ side of the mehitzah. “I wanted to say that this was the girls’ space and that the principal should not come here.” The girls’ space, according to Tamar, was to be respected by letting the Torah enter but not invaded by males who were using the space to monitor the girls’ behavior during tefillah instead of acknowledging the importance and privacy of that space. Upon switching to an all-girls high school, Tamar was refreshed by the prayer opportunities available to her. Although she never wanted to lead davening, she appreciated the involvement of women in tefilah. Davening took place three times a day and was very much student-led in terms of not only leading tefilot but also studying halakhot each day. Though there was no Torah reading or other parts of the service that
require a *halakhic minyan,* Tamar felt that her classmates really cared about the *davening* experience.

Deborah notes that her school’s *minyan* was mandatory for both male and female students and included a low *mehitzah* that was set up in the Beit Midrash to accommodate them. This wasn’t always the case; in some years, the configuration in the room changed.

In 12th grade they had a Beit Midrash room [for *tefillot*] designed as a *shul* but with pens. The girls were kept in pens [off to the side] and cliques formed in these pens. Boys were in the middle of the room. In other years there was a *mehitzah* down the middle but I don’t remember how *davening* was divided. I grew up Orthodox so there was no question that you would have a *mehitzah.* It was accepted. The question was whether you would actually *daven* or not. I always *davened* and was one of the good girls but *davened* fast and then talked to my friends and looked at the boys to see who was cute.

Although this humorous anecdote reflects the frame of mind of a teenager in high school, it helps us visualize how this *davening* environment was designed with the boys situated in the center of the room and the girls off to the sides in what was described as “pens.” In this way, the function and understanding of *mehitzah* or separation for prayer was maintained.

Nina, who attended an all-girls day school, explains that students in elementary school prayed together with their teachers in a classroom and then, in high school, everyone prayed together in the auditorium. Unlike at Deborah’s school, which was co-ed, Nina’s school had no need for a *mehitzah.* Regarding the segregation during prayer she notes, “That’s why I didn’t feel it so acutely. It would have been harder for me at this time had there been a *mehitzah.*”
The *mehitzah* proved to be significant at school as well as in the context of synagogue prayer which was very traditional. Dov’s synagogue, for example, totally lacked women’s involvement. He notes that he never belonged to a synagogue with a women’s *minyan*. The most involvement he witnessed was at his high school’s *mehitzah minyan* where the Torah was passed to the women’s side. Cary notes that, at his synagogue, the participation of women was also totally lacking. “Female participation was non-existent except to the extent that they threw candies [from the *mehitzah* at Bar Mitzvah boys].”

On Simhat Torah at Andrea’s synagogue the *mehitzah* was moved so that women could see the dancing. When the Torah was brought into the women’s section, however, women didn’t know what to do with it. At a Modern Orthodox synagogue that Yael frequented, it was customary for women to dance with the Torah. Yael remarks that her friends grew bored dancing with the Torah but she never did. When she was growing up, however, Yael’s family usually attended a Hasidic *shul* on Simhat Torah and she remembers being in the men’s section with her father and on his shoulders for the dancing. The exposure Yael received to this Jewish ritual made an impact on her and she remembers how she felt when she was robbed of the opportunity to participate in synagogue ritual as a young girl on Simhat Torah.

I must have been seven or eight years old. I was up at the Torah for an *aliyah* on Simhat Torah. One of the boys said the *aliyah* is just for boys and not for girls and I said it’s for children. That evening my mother said that I was getting too old and should stay on the women’s side. After that, Simhat Torah was no fun. There was no *shul* around where women could do anything except for stand around.

Yael, like the aforementioned women I interviewed, consistently expressed dedication to and involvement in their prayer communities. Although their comments
about the prayer environments they experienced reflect the perspective of hindsight, they offer insight into their early Jewish identities. If they did not like or fit into the prayer community of their schools, many found other places to go where they could find meaning in a prayer community. Similarly, these members of Tehillah have the ability to make their prayer experience meaningful or to seek out a meaningful prayer community. Prayer environments were and continue to be of important to them and this includes the set-up of the prayer space, ritual participation and the use of ritual objects.
In the Modern Orthodox world today, students in 12th grade are expected to think seriously about their options for study at seminaries and yeshivot in Israel for their pre-college year. One goal of the year in Israel is to provide an immersion in a serious Jewish learning environment prior to beginning their secular college studies. Another goal is to shape their hashkafa (religious outlook) and to increase their level of Jewish observance. Most of those interviewed attended seminary or yeshiva in Israel. Their experiences are significant because of their immersion in both prayer and study environments in Israel after the experience of their day schools and synagogues in North America. The experiences of the interviewees during their year in Israel will be explored in this chapter.

For Zev, who attended a co-ed Modern Orthodox day school in Boston and then went on to attend a single-sex yeshiva in Israel, the change of environment but also population of classmates is significant. The learning at his yeshiva was very different from his experiences in day school. Not only were classes at his yeshiva segregated but discussions about attending secular college in the future revealed that such a decision would be an issue for both the faculty and Zev’s fellow students. Like his day school, there was a strong focus on accumulating text study skills. Zev’s decision to go to secular college and not stay on for an additional year in yeshiva was the less of a dividing factor between himself and his fellow students. What was most significant was his experience studying with a female hevrutah in high school and then studying in an environment where he could only study with males. “People would ask me what it was
like to learn Talmud with a girl. I would stare at them and say what’s it like learning Talmud with me? Not that I was sex-blind or anything but it [co-ed hevrutot] wasn’t something that factored into my consciousness at all.”

Zev was fortunate to have his synagogue rabbi, whom he holds in high esteem, to rely on when needing to discuss issues in Orthodoxy and particularly issues that arose at yeshiva that challenged him. “One time in Israel at Yeshiva I encountered people who thought things that are ridiculous or “traditional,” I guess. I got frustrated and happened to be flying back [to North America soon after] with the rabbi and he made things seem OK in Orthodoxy at the end of the day.” Discussing issues with a rabbi is an important part of the yeshiva experience because students study in intense intellectual and social environments and through the development of new skills and the accumulation of new information, halakhic and otherwise, they are challenged. Thus, they rely on the support and good counsel of yeshiva rabbis who are available to them to discuss matters that arise during their yeshiva experience. Although Zev did not get that from his rabbis at yeshiva, he was able to confide in his rabbi from home. Nathan, on the other hand, distanced himself not only from the rabbis and his yeshiva but also from the learning. For a variety of reasons, he became repulsed by his experiences at yeshiva and became less religious as a result. He also left the program early.

Nina also found that spending two years at seminary in Israel wasn’t all that it was cut out to be. Although she felt freer in that environment than she had been, upon reflection, she believes that the environment was imprisoning. “At seminary in Israel, it was a breath of fresh air. It was more open than what I was used to but that wasn’t enough for me. There were things that didn’t feel right, not just about women in
Judaism.” As someone who grew up in the Orthodox world, being able to attend a seminary where she learned Talmud was refreshing at the time but as a staunch egalitarian Jew today, she recognizes that the environment was not one in which she would like to be today.

Samantha also did not have a particularly positive experience in Israel but understood that it was the norm to go there after high school. She deliberated between two places but ended up at the more liberal institution. At seminary, Samantha first encountered hevrutah learning but felt mixed about her experiences there because she missed her secular studies. She also felt stifled at seminary because there were no opportunities for self-expression.

Ariella also was disappointed with some aspects of her seminary studies. She thought seminary would be intense, feminist and progressive. She experienced a lot of loneliness and friction with the rabbis because she would read Torah for Women of the Wall.43 This shocked her because her seminary was known for being more intellectual, progressive and academic. To her dismay, she found it quite the contrary.

Appearances were everything; we were told to cover everything. The message was on marriage, family, child-raising and aliyah. It was heartbreaking. I tried the best I could. I would sneak off to other places to learn and attend shiurim. I signed up for a Hebrew University course in Bible. Talmud at the seminary was decent but the girls weren’t particularly engaged. No one wanted to talk about Halakha. No one wanted to be creative in the halakhic process. The Torah was never removed from the ark in the Beit Midrash. I was punished for going to the Women of the Wall each month and they threatened to kick me out of school because I went to an all women’s tefillah group. The focus was on all the wrong things. It was lacking largely because of the women who had attended.

43 Women of the Wall is a women’s tefillah group that meets at the Kotel for Rosh Hodesh each month. They’ve been met with both physical and verbal abuse by Ultra-Orthodox Jews who do not tolerate them at the Kotel. Now the group meets for Torah reading at Robinson’s Arch in the Davidson Excavation Center at the south wall of the Kotel.
Tamar, on the other hand, thoroughly enjoyed her experience at seminary. Following graduation from her all-girls Modern Orthodox high school, she spent a year and a half at seminary in Israel. Her decision to stay in Israel longer than one year reflected the value that she placed on women’s education and equality within the context of yeshiva and seminary studies in Israel.

Staying second year resulted in a big fight with my parents. I felt that I wanted to do it. It was important to me but not just for me. It was important that girls would do shanah bet. I felt it was a trend for boys and no one batted an eye if the boys did it. I wanted to break the social stigma. You can’t just talk about what the ideal is but you should get up and do it. Moving to the all-girls high school and staying for shanah bet meant that women’s education and learning was important to me. My education and learning were important to me. I wanted to be a role model for other people to do the same thing.

Tamar wanted to be a role model and break social stigma as did Blu Greenberg who wanted to study in Israel and break the stigma of study in Israel as something that men did or was only important for men. Tamar, like Nina and many of the other women who were interviewed, studied at a seminary that teaches women Talmud and is regarded as a relatively liberal Modern Orthodox establishment. For Tamar, the year in Israel was a particularly rewarding and exciting experience.

I needed the year of just limudei kodesh and just Torah lishma and delving into skills I didn’t get from a Modern Orthodox education. Some parts fell short but the all-girls high school I went to was leagues beyond the other schools. I spent a lot of time in the Beit Midrash. It was intense. My friends from high school weren’t flipping out; we already were ‘flipped out’. A lot of my friends stayed for a second year. We were on a moral high ground about becoming more frum.

Tamar used her year in Israel to increase her text skills and Jewish knowledge. She particularly enjoyed her time learning in hevrutah. “I loved the intensity of learning with a hevrutah. I wanted to be in charge of determining my own course of study. That
was empowering. My Jewish knowledge increased that year.” Not only did Tamar focus improving her text skills but she also found other compelling activities.

It was good to get out of the Beit Midrash once in a while. It wasn’t about partying but rather going to a friend’s house, watching DVDs instead of going to night seder. That’s the social part of it. I joined a gym, went to pottery and art classes and a class that combined text study and art. I didn’t think I was wasting time with art. I developed skills in that year. That was empowering.

Tamar’s experience at seminary was also positive because she began to lead davening and trained to become a shlichat tzibbur (prayer leader). “On Shabbat we’d daven on the roof. I led davening a couple times that year. That was a big deal to get over from not wanting to lead. People at seminary encouraged me to lead davening.” At her day school, although she participated in and enjoyed the prayer community of women, she never elected to lead davening. Her year at seminary, however, opened her eyes to new experiences including that of becoming a shlichat tzibbur.

Miriam’s experience at the same seminary, chosen for their Talmud instruction, opened her eyes to new opportunities. Miriam had been taught by women and she learned Talmud during high school; however at seminary she was taught by religious women instead of by a mix of secular Israelis and Orthodox rabbis who were her teachers at her community day school. In hindsight, Miriam wishes that she studied there during her gap year (following high school) instead of as a college junior because she felt that the year was a solidifying experience in terms of social connections and Jewish identity. Because she was a college junior, it wasn’t as much of a formative experience as she was only there for a semester. Still, she was still able to meet her goals of Talmud study at her seminary. “It wasn’t because I loved Talmud but it was
more that I didn’t want to go to a seminary where girls were spoon-fed Judaism. I wanted to see the texts like everyone else and not learn mussar (Jewish ethics).”

For others, not only seminary but the year in Israel provided the opportunity for new experiences. Andrea spent a year in Israel with her family and attended an all-girls school that taught Talmud. “It was a feminist, forward thinking school within Modern Orthodoxy. The teachers, including the Talmud teachers, were women.” This was the first time Andrea had encountered female Talmud teachers. It was also the first time she had studied with Israeli girls who, following the completion of high school, would serve in the army instead of doing national service which is what religious women in Israel generally select in lieu of army service.

Deborah also encountered new opportunities at her seminary where there was an emphasis on spirituality and theology as well as the development of halakha. She notes that she and her seminary classmates would engage in debate about partnership minyanim. Previously in day school she did not have the opportunity to discuss things such as spirituality and theology. She also experienced a lot of singing at her seminary, particularly before the hagim (holidays) and studied in an environment with a strong emphasis on hevrutah learning. Deborah also had the opportunity for cross-cultural relations, as she engaged in learning with Israeli classmates. “I noticed that my Israeli peers hadn’t learned Talmud before. The American girls were placed in the higher levels because we were more advanced but after a month or so the Israelis caught up.” Rachel, who attended a seminary that allowed her to wear tefilin also explains that the Israeli girls at her seminary were not exposed to Talmud study prior to arriving to study
there because the religious school system in Israel doesn’t require Talmud to be taught to girls.

Yael did not attend seminary but rather participated on the Young Judea year course program for observant Jews during her gap year in Israel.

I never went to Israel before my year in Israel. I was expected to go to seminary after high school but I didn’t want to be in a group of all girls for a year. That scared me socially. I also felt that I couldn’t go from biblical criticism classes to seminary but I wanted to take the year and go to Israel so I went on a study/volunteer program and liked the balance it presented. It was also co-ed and girls could wear pants. That signaled to me that it was a place that was more open. On Rosh Hodesh we had a women’s service with Torah reading. The rabbi who led our program had a more liberal vision of Modern Orthodoxy.

Although her parents were concerned that she wouldn’t fill in the gaps in her Jewish knowledge as others generally do during their year in yeshiva or seminary or that she wouldn’t return to being a normative Modern Orthodox Jew, they were supportive of her choice to spend the year in Israel on her selected program.

Many of those who spent significant time post-high school studying in Israel found the experience to be hindering and surprising in a number of ways. In some of these cases, the anticipated learning environment of rigor, personal growth and intellectual development turned out to be a more stifling and rigid than imagined. For others, the relative liberalism and room for critical thought which categorized their co-ed day school educational experience was not found in the study halls in Israel. For others, the Israel experience proved to be a refreshing opportunity to meet new people, be immersed in a new kind of learning environment and grow personally and intellectually. What can be said about all the interviewees is that their Israel experiences left a significant, shaping impact on them and who they are today.
Chapter 9:
Personal Perspectives on Modern Orthodoxy

“It means integration and synthesis of studies and values from both the very traditional Jewish and not so traditional Jewish worlds. You might view it as an incomplete education in both realms. Other than having been potentially exposed to certain ideas at an earlier age and challenged at an earlier age there may not have been a way that I would have rather been brought up.”

- Zev, 24 year old professional

The perspective of the interviewees on Modern Orthodoxy is an important part of this paper because those interviewed all come from Modern Orthodox backgrounds and have been raised in Modern Orthodox institutions. Many of those interviewed have distanced themselves from Modern Orthodoxy today whereas others have decided to affirm their affiliation with Modern Orthodoxy while defending the legitimacy of the inclusion of partnership minyanim within the movement.

While interviewees highlight the definition of Modern Orthodoxy as being *shomer mitzvot* (observing the commandments) while receiving and embracing a secular education within a modern, secular world, many are quite cynical of Modern Orthodoxy being able to achieve a balance between modernity and Orthodoxy, although acknowledge the balance that Modern Orthodoxy is attempting to achieve. Yael explains that “Modern Orthodoxy means being stuck in the middle and trying to balance things. It means being told you can be two people at once and that’s OK. It means engaging with the rest of the world and not compromising.”

According to Tamar “It means appreciating different parts of life like literature and art, connecting to spirituality and a belief in God, and caring about Judaism, Jewish law and Jewish community.” She therefore sees its main objective as fusing various
parts of one’s identity. Her education, having taught her traditional texts and textual skills that allow her to tap into a wealth of Jewish knowledge, has also consisted of instruction that has substituted Midrash and commentary as what is literally in the Torah for what is actually in the text.

Nina also believes that there were positive elements to her Modern Orthodox education as she grew up knowing a lot about Jewish law, ritual and practice that those who were not raised Orthodox did not know. At the same time, she regards her upbringing as very insular and chooses to no longer identify with that world aside from using their institutions of eruv, mikveh (ritual bath) and hekhshers (kosher certification).

An Orthodox education is toxic to the neshama (soul). I don’t know any other way to put it. Components that are toxic include saying women are less than men or saying that women have a greater metaphysical spirit. This is insulting. It’s just toxic to hear those things because that’s the role of women I was taught. The way that non-Jews were spoken about is hard for me. We were taught that Jews were better. The implication was that the Jewish people were better even if it wasn’t said straight out. We want our kids to think that the Jewish people are lucky, not better. Everyone is lucky but we’re lucky that this is what we get to do.

In her very heated statement about her Orthodox education, Nina conveys her Orthodox education teaching her and her classmates a worldview that incorporated a sense of superiority as Jews as well as insularity. “Being in such an insular environment made it toxic when there are things you’re not allowed to think, talk about. There are expectations you need to meet.”

Others view their education as incorporating both modernity and Orthodox, which, although sometimes appropriately balancing these two paradigms, is also replete with challenges. Zev, for example, believes that the movement’s education system teaches attitudes that exist within the Modern Orthodox but challenge those raised in that system when approaching modernity. On Modern Orthodox he explains,
It means having unwittingly straddled a lot of thorny issues. When you’re younger you don’t realize any of this. It, on the one hand, gave a very traditional education which is something that I definitely find valuable at this point because that equips you with the tools to do whatever with it as you will. On the other hand it means an exposure to certain ideas with regard to feminism and ways to approach the world that if you were to shut out entirely it would be easier to stick to traditional ideas and curriculum because you wouldn’t know any better.

Zev, although having been raised within a Modern Orthodox education system, confronts the secular and religious world today as both a product of the system but also as a staunch feminist. While he recognizes that it would be easier to adhere to traditional ideas of women’s place in Judaism that were taught in his day school, for example, he chooses not to.

Deborah states that her school adhered to Torah U’Maddah, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s Modern Orthodox philosophy, which values both Jewish and secular learning. Jewish and general studies subjects were therefore equally important but they never mixed or informed each other. Dov also explained that for him, a Modern Orthodox education meant that while both Torah and Maddah make up different parts of a person, they should not dominate each another. For Samantha, her Modern Orthodox education taught her what it means to be part of the secular world, by reading secular literature and pursuing a career in the secular world while being shomer mitzvot. These interviewees believe that while their Modern Orthodox education presented an identity that is constructed of both secular and Jewish aspects, these aspects are nevertheless to be valued discretely.

Conversely, Andrea believes that a Modern Orthodox education is defined by the ability to bridge the secular world and observant, halakhic world and not see contradictions between the two. “It’s about taking the beauty of non-Jewish education,
science, humanities and the world and not be afraid of it but not forget Jewish values or education. It’s the conversation between the realms of science and religion and finding the middle road between the two.”

For others, Modern Orthodoxy, both as a term and an educational system, was not viewed as a success. Rachel notes that while Modern Orthodoxy is about modernity, socializing with non-Jews and attempting to fuse science and religion, it also means being torn. Nathan explains that Modern Orthodoxy means never fully engaging with the modern world because combining the two means that neither modernity nor Orthodoxy will be actualized. Alan believes that Modern Orthodoxy has always been full of inconsistencies, typified by the combination of his parents’ generation’s lack of regard for serious text study along with social programming including co-educational dances. Andrea doesn’t define this practice of Modern Orthodoxy as inconsistent. Rather, she views her parents’ Modern Orthodoxy as more open-minded and less right-wing than the one in which she grew up. She believes that her parents’ generation struggled less with their secular and religious identities.

Discussing Modern Orthodoxy today, Nathan notes that inconsistencies exist within this identity, such as a laxity in private observance but stringency in public observance of Kashrut (dietary laws) and Shabbat. Ariella not only believes that Modern Orthodoxy has come to be defined as observance of Kashrut and Shabbat but is also about assigned gender roles and the inconsistencies surrounding gender roles which she feels does not reflect modernity.

The [Modern Orthodox] Jewish lifestyle isn’t in sync with the secular world because women can’t be witnesses or vote in Judaism but in the secular world they can. Yet there are still challenges in the secular world. The term Modern Orthodoxy has lost meaning because of women’s issues. It’s not
meaningful; it has a negative connotation. People think Modern Orthodoxy means being observant and participating in the secular world.

Ariella not only believes that women’s issues take the legitimacy out of the definition of Modern Orthodoxy but also sees that women’s issues and the treatment of women within Modern Orthodoxy is one of the areas of inconsistency within the movement. Reflecting on Modern Orthodoxy today, she notes that “It includes more of a ritual availability to women and participation of women but Modern Orthodoxy doesn’t want to accommodate or include women as much as I think is necessary and should be.”

Inconsistencies have existed within a Modern Orthodox identity in the past and continue to exist today. Women’s issues in particular have been viewed differently over time. Reflecting upon Modern Orthodoxy in her parents’ generation, Tamar notes:

Education for women was different and there weren’t Bat Mitzvahs. My generation got access to a lot more and got taken more seriously and has gone farther than women a generation before. In the next generation we’ll go further and want something totally different. It depends on the temperature of the Jewish community at the time. Women are real participants. Women will want to be real participants in the Jewish community.

Not only has Tamar’s generation received more access to Jewish education than her parents’ generation but she has been privy to more access in terms of ritual participation as well as activity in terms of leadership roles within the Jewish community.

Women’s place within Modern Orthodoxy’s ritual participation was not the only area that interviewees discussed. Sociologically speaking, Deborah notes that although one might think that there would be cognitive dissonance among Modern Orthodox women today when it comes to their roles in secular vs. religious life, she
notes that many women she knows still assume lower income jobs when compared to their husbands in order to be the primary caregivers for their children.

While there were some who expressed their affiliation with Modern Orthodoxy today, the majority of those interviewed were uncomfortable with the term and had a particularly jaded view of the future of Modern Orthodoxy, considered it to be very different during their parents’ generation than it was during their childhood and see that it will (continue to) become fragmented in the future. Some people, such as Cary and Samantha, wish to affiliate with Modern Orthodoxy, yet they see the challenges that the movement is facing. Cary states “It’s not clear that Modern Orthodoxy will continue fifty years from now as recognizable. It’s currently unstable.” Samantha believes that the movement will split in two and will form right and left wing factions, with her family having to choose with which part to affiliate. Optimistically speaking, she believes that the changes that are part of the movement are natural, as schisms have always occurred within Judaism.

Miriam articulates the direction of the Modern Orthodox movement in a way that reflects the mentality of many Jews today who define themselves as post-denominational, thereby shying away from denominational labels, and who choose to join independent minyanim.

In the past ten years there has been a dramatic change as a result of accumulation of new opportunities for women. Everything is cataclysmically shifting. Years from now Orthodox, Conservative and Reform won’t mean anything. They’ll be categories that people will say they used to be. There used to be a time when the world was divided into three races; now there is a new way of talking about human diversity. Once the terms Orthodox and Conservative cease to be meaningful, Modern Orthodoxy won’t be meaningful either. I don’t know where it’s headed. I feel like I grew up with a stable sense of the world being divided, the Jewish world being divided into categories. I knew who I was and what I was as a
Jew but now it’s much more challenging to think about and understand one’s own Jewish identity and place in the Jewish world and the world at large. It’s also hard for me to raise my children in a post-modern moment where truths and categories have blurred. It’s confusing.

Miriam, like several others interviewed, not only grew up within a Modern Orthodox context but is also raising children in a world that provides opportunities to either adhere to a denomination or remove labels and blur definitions of what Jewish identity means today. Nina, for example, recognizes that an Orthodox Jewish education and life is more connected to Judaism, Jewish observance and Jewish values in comparison to other Jewish denominations. While some aspects of Modern Orthodoxy are appealing, Nina and her husband do not want to provide their children with a traditional Modern Orthodox education because, in their opinion, it stifles both creativity and critical thinking.

I don’t want them [my children] to see Judaism or Torah study as something presented as a box that they have to accept and that they can’t open or be critical about. Growing up there were certain questions you couldn’t ask. My children are allowed to ask whatever they want to ask. I don’t want them to feel the way I did growing up.

Nina also believes that there are basic human values that a Modern Orthodox education neglects to teach, such as openness to egalitarianism and to people who aren’t Jewish which she wishes an educational system to impart on her children that a Modern Orthodox education system cannot provide.

Both parents of school-age children as well as students and young professionals who do not yet have children have stated their views on the direction of Modern Orthodoxy. Many, particularly those who no longer identify with the movement, see Modern Orthodoxy as a failed experiment and as the cause of schism and disunity.
Alan, for example, believes that the movement was a failed experiment because of its rightward move. He is both surprised and disappointed by his high school friends’ decision to stay within the movement and at the policies and statements of Young Israel synagogues and their leadership. He not only paints a bleak picture for the future of Modern Orthodoxy but also believes that the movement is facing a leadership crisis. Despite his strong views, he states “It’s not my battle, that’s not my world though, I’ve left that world.” Peter, like Alan who has chosen to no longer affiliate within the Modern Orthodox world in which he grew up, has also chosen not to characterize himself as Modern Orthodox because of its rightward move over time.

Nina, who states that she is unsure where the movement is headed, is also not interested in struggles presented by the movement, although she finds that she is still somewhat connected to Modern Orthodoxy because of the use she makes of some of its institutions.

Zev also has a very cynical view of Modern Orthodoxy and doesn’t see it going in any unified direction. Part of the reason for this isn’t only based on the values of the movement but also on how the movement and those belonging to it self-define. “Modern Orthodoxy defines itself by exclusion. We are not this; we are not that. People brought up in it would say I know I don’t have huge payot (side curls) and I don’t drive on Shabbat so I’m Modern Orthodox.” Instead of defining oneself by what s/he believes or by the movement’s ideology, religious outlook and traditional practices, Zev in addition to other interviewees believe that people affiliated with the movement are unsure of how to self-define because the movement is neither part of the insular, Ultra-Orthodox world nor part of the liberal streams of Judaism.
Although the movement, according to those interviewed, is fragmenting and heading off into a variety of directions, many viewed partnership minyanim as both a factor in the cause for its fragmentation and a legitimate part of the left-wing of the Modern Orthodox movement. Yael believes that Modern Orthodoxy is fragmenting into the camps of liberal Orthodoxy and centrist Orthodoxy. “The middle is weakening,” she explains, “and will polarize and split. There are more people becoming black hat and more people davening at partnership minyanim.” Cary also believes that the Modern Orthodox world will be ripped apart but partnership minyanim and the philosophy of those who attend the minyan will further the bifurcation and not just be a camp into which the more liberal people in the movement fall. He believes, however, that many of the adherents of partnership minyanim would attend Modern Orthodox synagogues if these minyanim did not exist. According to the Minyan Tehillah survey results for 2008, Cary’s assumption is quite accurate as over 50% of those interviewed for the survey attend the Orthodox minyan options available in Cambridge when not attending Tehillah.

Those who have been interviewed, even if not identifying as Modern Orthodox today, are clearly aware of the tensions within the movement and the particular tensions that partnership minyanim and those identifying with partnership minyanim both place on the movement and are struggling with themselves. Many have a very cynical view of the future of a unified Modern Orthodoxy and do not believe that the ideals of a movement that is both modern and Orthodox can be actualized.
Chapter 10:  
Partnership Minyanim: How Feminism and Halakha Converge

Just as there is a divergence between those who continue to affiliate with Modern Orthodoxy and those who have chosen to stop affiliating with the movement, so too is there a divergence in terms of how members of Tehillah view the phenomenon of partnership minyanim. These members can be divided into two camps: those who see the minyan reflective of their understanding of halakhic legitimacy and those who see women’s increased ritual participation as a moral imperative that supersedes halakha. The latter camp includes those who both see Tehillah as fulfilling a moral obligation as well as those who believe that Tehillah is not doing enough to maximize women’s participation within Jewish ritual. Many in the latter category have become critical of Tehillah and the partnership minyanim movement and are choosing to pray in both partnership minyan as well as egalitarian settings in Cambridge.

Deborah, who believes that her Jewish education gave her the skills of Talmudic logic to approach religion rationally, thinks that partnership minyanim are a wonderful way for women to participate in prayer without it being halakhically problematic. In her interview, she further explains this point by stating that the halakhic sources for megillah reading at Purim are the same for Torah reading. She therefore defends her involvement by Talmudic logic and sources.

Deborah’s involvement with partnership minyanim is also based on her exposure to women’s involvement in prayer and Torah reading in which she grew up actively participating along with her mother who actively fought for public ritual opportunities for women. She was also exposed to partnership minyanim at Kehilat
Shira Hadasha in Jerusalem. Although she found the style of prayer to be enjoyable, she did not like how big and crowded the minyan was in Jerusalem. Her involvement also comes from a communal and institutional framework, as publications such as the Edah Journal and attendance at JOFA conferences promoted this style of tefillah and helped her find other like-minded people with whom she agreed on this topic.

Likewise, Yael first experienced the partnership minyanim movement at Kehilat Shira Hadasha in Jerusalem during her year in Israel.

I’m a public person. I like leading things and I connect to Judaism through ritual. Shira Hadasha had beautiful davening and it felt satisfying that there could be a piece of Judaism that I could have access to. I liked their ideology. It took women seriously enough to let them lead things. I loved the singing at Shira Hadasha. It felt equal and didn’t matter that men and women were leading different things. I loved not having to bend on Halakha.

Unlike Deborah, she found her place not only within the Orthodox movement at Shira Hadasha but also within her personal preference for an aesthetically pleasing prayer environment.

Samantha, who first began her involvement with partnership minyanim at the partnership minyan at her college’s Hillel as well as at Darkhei Noam in New York, believes that partnership minyanim’s adherence to halakha defines them as Orthodox and that they will gain more legitimacy in the Orthodox world over time. Samantha not only feels comfortable attending partnership minyanim because of the feeling that she counts in the quorum of the minyan and can take an active role but also because of the convincing teshuvot written by rabbis Shapiro and Sperber who delineate a compelling

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44 The Edah Journal is the publication of a now defunct Modern Orthodox organization that affiliated with the liberal wing of Modern Orthodoxy. Many publications on the JOFA website on Orthodoxy and feminism previously appeared in the Edah Journal.
reading of the texts. Much of the leadership of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah\textsuperscript{45} in Manhattan has also sanctioned the halakhic legitimacy of these minyanim and because of that she feels comfortable joining the partnership minyan movement.

Miriam discovered the partnership minyan movement at Kehilat Shira Hadasha while living in Israel. Although she returned to Cambridge and continued to be active in the Orthodox minyan in the community, she was nevertheless inspired by what she found in Israel and decided to organize an egalitarian megillah reading on Purim to reflect what she found in Israel and what she found was lacking in her community.

Miriam and her friends in Cambridge were not the only ones discussing the possibility of maximizing women’s ritual participation through an egalitarian megillah reading on Purim or creating a partnership minyan in their community. Her interest in pioneering this community in Cambridge reflects the halakhic legitimacy of this style of worship as defended by rabbis Shapiro and Sperber. “I’m happy that Shapiro and Sperber have written those articles. I would feel uncomfortable doing what we’re doing without texts out there that are written, studied and discussed.” Additionally, she finds that the network of other partnership minyanim also validates the cause and is empowering because there were other people and institutions grappling with the same questions and challenges that Miriam was confronting.

There was a big question that I was walking around with. How can I be a woman, an intellectual, living in the world and learning that women could

\textsuperscript{45} Yeshivat Chovevei Torah is a Modern Orthodox rabbinical school in New York City founded in 1999 under the leadership of Rabbi Avi Weiss. Its mission is to recruit, professionally train, and place rabbis throughout the world that will lead the Jewish people and shape their community's spiritual and intellectual character in consonance with Modern Open Orthodox values and commitments. These values, which differ from right-wing Orthodoxy, include embracing secular studies along with Jewish learning, concern for k’lal Yisrael (the Jewish community including the non-Orthodox), pluralism and openness to dialogue with non-Jews and non-observant Jews, expanding roles of women and sensitivity to women’s issues within Jewish law, and support for the religious significance of the Modern State of Israel.
do anything that men could do and sit on that side of the mehitzah and be Orthodox? There were so many disconnects that I had been squelching. Suddenly I realized there was a place where I could talk about it and where it was OK.

Like Deborah, who found that the community created by those who are also interested and active in partnership minyanim to be important, so too does Miriam find the opportunities and frameworks in which to discuss these minyanim to be important. “For me the intellectual stimulation of the conversations is as integral as the davening itself.”

For others, such as Nina, the conversations surrounding the teshuvot (responsa literature) and women’s increased ritual participation within a halakhic framework are irrelevant and should not even take place. For her, these minyanim should move in the direction of egalitarianism instead of grappling with questions that she finds are anachronistic.

Egalitarianism is about fighting for Torah values. You can’t say derakheha darkhei noam (its ways are ways of pleasantness) and not let women have an aliya or be dealing with agunah issues. They’re two conflicting values: Torah and the Jewish community. The Torah I love shouldn’t be conflicting with the values I believe to be true. It can’t be that lived Judaism is a violation of civil rights. I don’t want to have to argue that women have the right to vote. That’s what JOFA does. Sitting in a JOFA conference would make me feel sick because they were talking about things that really shouldn’t be discussed anymore. Of course women should be doing these things.

Unlike Miriam and Deborah, Nina is a staunch supporter of egalitarian tefilah as opposed to partnership minyanim and finds that the discussions that occur at JOFA conferences are not pertinent, such as those that highlight halakhic issues in the Orthodox community such as women and aliya to the Torah as well as agunah issues. Nina, however, does not only express her dislike for the conversations that go on at
JOFA conferences, but she also relates the status of women in Jewish law and ritual practice to racism.

I never wanted to fight for women’s rights and was never involved with Orthodox Feminism. It made me sick. Why should we have to justify that black people had to sit in the front of the bus, or vote? We’re so beyond. We don’t want to argue that black people have the right to vote. Of course they do. We’re talking about human rights. We treat people as people.

Thus, Nina separates herself from the halakhic discourse and arguments on the topic and rather views the issue of barring women from both ritual participation and from equal status within Jewish law as one of ethics as opposed to halakha.

Zev, who participated in the partnership minyan on his college campus but initially heard about this phenomenon from his sister who attended Kehilat Shira Hadasha, also relates women’s involvement and the treatment of women in Jewish ritual and public life to racism. “If you were to change the names of the parties here from men and women to blacks and whites, 99% of the people who are in the male/white column would say, of course we need to let the blacks/women do this. Because it’s been phrased as men and women for so long and the answer is ‘gender roles,’ it’s a given.”

Zev is not as critical as Nina when it comes to the halakhic discussions about partnership minyanim occurring at an institutional and communal level but nevertheless believes that more progress is needed in terms of increasing women’s participation within the minyan. “I’d be ready to say women can do anything and I wonder whether Modern Orthodoxy will follow in that suit versus the opportunity they’re losing at not giving women full opportunity.” Zev is not only critical of how the institution of Modern Orthodoxy limits women’s public, ritual involvement but is also critical of those women who do not wish to involve themselves in opportunities available to
increase their participation, such as at partnership minyanim. He is both frustrated by these women who do not wish to get involved with minyanim such as Tehillah and also fears that their lack of involvement will result in the Jewish community losing good female Jewish leaders.

As highlighted above, some members of Tehillah have stated the halakhic reasons for their participation in these minyanim whereas others state the ethical imperative that goes into their reasoning. Some members of the minyan are involved with Tehillah for multiple reasons. Nathan, for example, has chosen to get involved with Tehillah not only because of the halakhic reasons but also because of what he personally gains from the minyan.

Nathan initially got involved with Tehillah because he was searching for something outside of the traditional Orthodox model and knew the halakhic basis for this form of Jewish worship. “I knew the halakhot about what a man needs to do in davening. The minyan got it right about women’s roles and men’s roles in the liturgy.” As a former gabbai of his youth movement’s minyan, he knew that for some parts of the service it didn’t matter if someone under the age of Bar Mitzvah (who has the same status as a woman according to Jewish law) was leading certain parts of the service.

Although presenting this angle of the halakhic approach to partnership minyan davening, Nathan believes that full egalitarian participation of both genders is completely warranted. “Tradition would have a problem with it [egalitarianism] but halakhically there isn’t a problem. It’s a hashkafic, not halakhic difference.”

Furthermore, Nathan states that both partnership minyan and egalitarian davening could be accepted if leadership in the Orthodox world took a stance and promoted the
increased inclusion of women in Jewish public ritual as both *halakhic* and morally acceptable.

The justification for not changing the *halakha* is because our *g’dolim* [religious leadership] are too narrow-minded or not in touch with our community and with the modern world, in which we live. They don’t realize what they’re doing to women and women’s children when they see women subjugated by our tradition. We have leaders. Appropriate leadership would change the *halakha*. There isn’t a lot that needs to be changed to incorporate women equally. You just take away *z’man geramah* (time bound commandments) issues and *t’zniut* (modesty) issues as the all pervasive. Women can’t be anywhere because, God forbid, a man looks at a woman. We don’t live in that world. Reasonably you can’t rationalize them anymore.

Passionately, Nathan tackles this topic and presents both an argument for changing the law as well as the current attitude within the Orthodox world by which he is disappointed. “The reasons for *z’man geramah* are artificial in our lives. It’s chauvinist, bigoted and it’s not moral and we shouldn’t be following it.”

Yet, Nathan does not believe that the entire model of traditional Jewish prayer should be disregarded. He believes in the inclusion of women from moral, *halakhic* as well as aesthetic standpoints but he also believes in the maintaining some semblance of a traditional Jewish prayer environment by *davening* in an environment where a *mehitzah* is present.

There is a value to men sitting by themselves and doing something spiritual. There is very little time when men feel comfortable being touchy-feely together and it’s an important thing for men to be in touch with their emotions and it’s a time that is appropriate for doing that. It’s a value that I have come to appreciate a whole lot.

Women’s increased participation and the maintenance of a traditional prayer environment or the convergence of feminism and *halakha* are two important aspects of what defines a partnership minyan. As Nathan has conveyed, the benefits of this prayer
community are not restricted to the place of women in Jewish ritual but also prove to be important and beneficial for men as well.

Many of those interviewed echoed similar sentiments regarding the benefits of this style of prayer for both genders. Some interviewees have stated that the women’s or gender issues that arise in both the style of prayer and the conversations about partnership minyanim are not just women’s issues but affect both genders equally, as both genders constitute the community. Rachel, for example, who was introduced to partnership minyanim through Kehilat Shira Hadasha, believes that this model of prayer works because not only can women’s role within it be argued from a *halakhic* basis but the prayer community includes and necessitates both men and women’s involvement as the *tzibbur*. Involving both genders in prayer leadership is also important because as some, such as Cary and Nathan, have noted, women’s voices are advantageous and appropriate for reading certain *megilot* and for leading certain *tefilot* and can enhance the atmosphere.

The inclusion and maximized participation of both men and women in the *tefillah* experience at partnership minyanim not only reflects the sensitivity with regard to gender roles of those who attend the *minyan* but also reflects the sensitivity of those who attend the *minyan* toward other issues of exclusion or inclusion and invisibility or visibility. According to Yael, *halakha* may need to be compromised on in order to accommodate to the contemporary values of the *tzibbur* when it comes to the inclusion of members of the community who may otherwise be isolated. “When you work hard to square it [the halakhic process] with [a] values [system] it works less, not just on women’s issues but also on homosexuality. The halakhic process needs to change. The
bottom line is that there needs to be an answer to these things.” Thus, not only do partnership minyanim need to grapple with issues of inclusion of women within the prayer community but must also work at including homosexuals, converts and other members of the Jewish community who may be on the peripheries. These are challenges that are present not only in partnership minyanim but are also present in both Modern Orthodoxy as well as liberal denominations of Judaism.

For some, however, it is not the only the particular halakhot but also the philosophy of the minyan that needs to be given critical thought and attention when maximizing the inclusiveness of the participants. Ariella, for example, believes that the minyan, as a bastion of feminism, needs to consider its objectives as both a prayer community and an ideology.

In feminism we need to think of our goals. What is the be all and end all? Is it Tehillah? If this isn’t our goal then what are our goals not only in this prayer group but in terms of how we identify and understand halakha. Some congregants may not care. They just want to come to shul. It’s important to have awareness and commitment to Halakha and the halakhic process and think about goals in the long-run in terms of women’s issues. Women’s issues are everybody’s issues ultimately.

For Ariella, women’s issues are not just issues that women must act upon but they are also issues with which the community must be concerned. Just as the community has a responsibility to become active in terms of women’s issues, so too must women become active when it comes to the needs of the community including those in the center and on the periphery.

As Elie Holzer, co-founder of Kehilat Shira Hadasha, has indicated, inclusiveness and equality are representative of other values to which partnership minyanim should adhere. Holzer demands that the leadership of partnership minyanim
not only ensure that women are no longer invisible within public Jewish ritual but also take note of who else might be invisible, such as those with social issues or those who are below the poverty line. He firmly believes that if the community is not acting on social issues, in addition to gender issues, then they cannot truly be called feminist because they are not looking out for those who are also disadvantaged. “It is both a failure within our tefillah and within our families if people go home without a place for lunch.”

Thus, Shira Hadasha makes an effort to have a rotation of families open their homes each week so that no one leaves Shabbat services without a place to go for a meal.

The opinions of those involved with partnership minyanim and the division between ethical and halakhic reasoning for this form of Jewish worship is reflective of the interviewees views on halakha as well as their halakhic literacy. Those who argued the legitimacy of the existence of partnership minyanim from a halakhic perspective did so because they themselves were both literate in halakha and could navigate the presented Talmudic and contemporary sources on the issues of inclusion of women within service leading and Torah reading. Additionally, many of these people were already inspired and committed to Talmud learning and had familiarity with the arguments as presented in the sources. For those who have studied the halakhot and halakhic literature in general, they understood that there is much complexity behind Jewish law and that there is not necessarily one opinion that can dictate the direction in which a prayer community moves.

Those who expressed the ethical imperative for the existence of both partnership minyanim and egalitarian prayer communities were not only literate in the halakha but

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were also committed to an ethical agenda that supersedes what halakhic decisors and rabbinic leadership preach today. The disappointment in and exasperation that many of those interviewed feel toward the Orthodox rabbinic leadership today does not, however, bar them from engaging in not only the debates but also in the prayer communities that echo their personal agenda and beliefs for what a prayer community should be about. They are indeed committed to being engaged in prayer communities and have made it a priority in their lives both as young people as well as adults. Last, those introduced to partnership minyanim, be it in Jerusalem, New York or Cambridge have their pulse on the trends within prayer communities in the Jewish world today. They are aware of the buzz that Kehilat Shira Hadasha has created and they are also aware of the challenges that partnership minyanim present, not only halakhically or ethically but also organizationally and logistically. This next chapter will reveal those challenges through the eyes of the participants of Minyan Tehillah
Chapter 11:  
Tehillah: The Challenges of an Independent Minyan

As interviewees have expressed, Minyan Tehillah caters to a particular population and is an important prayer community reflective of the goals of both maximized participation of women and a commitment to halakha. As both a partnership and independent minyan, there are many successes in addition to many challenges that Tehillah presents to its community members.

From a very personal perspective, some members of the minyan do not receive adequate support from family members (inclusive of parents, siblings and spouses) for participation in such a minyan. Others do not receive support from mentors and rabbis from whom they have learned. In spite of this, members of the minyan are committed to both their involvement in and the goals of Tehillah and believe that this is the best personal option for engagement in Jewish prayer.

Others mention the social challenges that the minyan presents. As a community that does not meet on a weekly basis, it is not a full-functioning community. Zev, for example, states “I would feel differently about it if it met weekly because then you’re in enough of a groove to get used to this but every other week or three times in two months, it’s hard to keep a flow and feel like it’s a real community.” For some, the irregular meeting times of the meeting serve as both a hindrance and turn-off for getting more involved with the minyan, as the opportunities to get to know the people with whom one is davening become stifled. Thus, many of those interviewed who are both single and in their early twenties similarly expressed that the minyan does not provide a social outlet for them and that their social outlet is better found in minyanim such as the
Orthodox minyan at Harvard Hillel that meets on a more regular basis and also consists of mostly young singles as opposed to a mixture of singles, married couples and young families.

Others question the sustainability of the minyan in the face of a transient community, the lack of a rabbinic leader and the challenges of the quorum consisting of ten men and ten women. For others, the challenges of quorum have little to do with ensuring the there are twenty people present in order to conduct services. For Miriam, “The quorum issue is an ongoing problem from the beginning. It is a difficult moment when a woman leads Psukei D’Zimrah but then a man comes up and leads Shacharit.” Thus, Miriam, as well as other members of the minyan who grapple with the halakhic and feminist dilemmas that this minyan presents, are frustrated by the limited role of women in the minyan. Although Miriam wrestles with this dilemma, there are other members of the minyan who choose to forego their participation in Tehillah because of this very issue.

Following Nina’s return from spending a year in Israel and taking part in the Shira Hadasha community, she realized that she did not like that women were barred from leading half the service. “It was more upsetting than the Orthodox minyan because at [the Orthodox minyan at] Hillel, there was some consistency. At Shira Hadasha and Tehillah people have egalitarian values but are locked into a rigid notion of halakha and are fearful of not being called Orthodox. It’s a mitzvah to follow the Torah, not a mitzvah to follow Orthodoxy.” Thus, Nina views both the members and philosophy of minyanim such as Tehillah as hypocritical and fearful. She believes that a lot more
people would agree to becoming involved in fully egalitarian services but go to Tehillah for social reasons.

A goal of independent minyanim is to create a positive and warm atmosphere as not only a prayer community but also as a social community. Founded on a philosophy and values aligned most closely with Orthodoxy, some members of Tehillah are concerned that these values have been neglected by much of the Tehillah community and that they have unwittingly decided to forego these values because the minyan has transitioned to a social scene from a community based on halakhic and philosophical ideals. Some members of the minyan believe that Tehillah wants to appeal to those who are Orthodox but doesn’t want to consider the minyan “Modern Orthodox.”

There is a sense that Tehillah wouldn’t want to consider ourselves Modern Orthodox but we want to see ourselves as appealing to people coming from that background. I can’t imagine Orthodoxy embracing partnership minyanim. I don’t see these minyanim as supplanting the role of Modern Orthodoxy and the role it has held. There may be a bleeding across of both of them.

Cary, in this quote, conveys a sense of uncertainty about the minyan’s future within a Modern Orthodox context. He doesn’t believe that Orthodoxy will come to embrace Tehillah and other partnership minyanim, nor does he believe that these minyanim will completely take over the Modern Orthodox movement but he does state that there can be an influence of partnership minyanim on at least some factions of the Modern Orthodox movement. Others, such as Andrea, believe that the community’s vision is not only moving away from its roots within Modern Orthodox ideology but is moving toward an ideology that is more closely aligned with the Conservative movement.

Tehillah and a lot of partnership minyanim attract people from both the Conservative and Modern Orthodox spectrums. Tehillah sometimes forgets that its founding vision is under halakhic framework of the Orthodox, not
the Conservative movement. The minyan sometimes forgets that and the people who come to Tehillah sometimes forget that. There is a pull between Conservative and Orthodox members. Orthodox members sometimes forget that it’s not a Conservative minyan.

While independent minyanim consist mostly of those who have been raised in the Conservative movement and partnership minyanim consist of those raised in both Conservative and Orthodox institutions, there is a concern that not only leadership skills from the Conservative movement will be brought into the minyan but that values of the movement will take over Modern Orthodox values. Some members feel that this is a unique concern within Tehillah, whereas others feel as though this pervades the phenomenon of partnership minyanim.

For some, exposure to increased participation of women within Jewish ritual at Tehillah has led participants of the minyan to think seriously about their role in and preference for a gendered versus completely egalitarian prayer environment. Yael, for example, found that Tehillah initiated her interest in participating in egalitarian prayer environments.

Tehillah was my gateway drug. Partnership minyanim are gateway drugs to Conservative Judaism because once you get a little taste of equality you want the whole thing. At Tehillah I felt equal. At a Conservative minyan I felt equivalent. At Tehillah men and women are equally taken seriously and respected but at an egalitarian service I feel interchangeable with a man. Tehillah, however, is gendered and I didn’t need my prayer experience to be that way. If I was given the choice to attend one or the other if it was equally convenient, I don’t know what I would do.

Although Yael has expressed how positive her experiences have been at both Tehillah and other partnership minyanim, she has also become accustomed to prayer in egalitarian settings and has made the transition from participating in completely male-led, traditional minyanim to egalitarian minyanim with Tehillah serving as the corridor between the two.
I respect opinions of people who think egalitarianism is not a valid halakhic interpretation but I’m not sure if I care anymore. I’m convinced of Tehillah’s validity but I’m not sure where it’s headed. I’ve had intense conversations about Tehillah and specifically about the quorum issue. I want the same effort to be put into getting out the 10th woman. That’s when I know I’ll be taken seriously.

Thoughtfully, Yael addresses several of the challenges of the minyan including the “quorum issue” which continues to pervade discussions among members of the minyan as well as on the board level. As a minyan that is both committed to a traditionally understood interpretation of halakha and a maximization of opportunities for both men and women to participate in the ritual and leadership aspects of the minyan, there is a continuous struggle between following a halakhic framework and not only maximizing the roles of men and women in the minyan but also being as sensitive and inclusive as possible. The notion of a traditional minyan (consisting of ten men over the age of Bar Mitzvah) allows public prayer and the recitation of all components of the prayer service, including Torah reading, to take place. At Tehillah, the presence of ten women, in addition to ten men, is required in order to commence public prayer. The decision to include a quorum of ten men and ten women is based not on halakhic precedent but rather on one of gender sensitivity that allows for women, just as men, to be just as responsible as men for making up this unique prayer community and for beginning davening as a community.

The quorum definition of the minyan, as sensitive as it sounds, has caused tension among members of Tehillah. From one perspective, delaying the beginning of davening to wait for ten women with ten men already present can violate various halakhot regarding the time when prayer must commence as well as the concept of tircha d’tzibbur (unnecessarily making the prayer community wait). Others who wish
to move the direction of the minyan toward egalitarianism do not want to wait for twenty persons but would rather begin davening when ten people are present. Those who stand by the custom of the minyan to wait for a quorum that is sensitive to including both genders see this decision to wait as an important value and a defining factor of the minyan.

Cary believes that the quorum issue is reflective of the demographic factor of the community. Cambridge not only has a transient Jewish community but those who have decided to settle in Cambridge for an extended period of time, often do so because they marry and start families. Thus, childrearing has an effect on the minyan because it not only reduces the number of people who can attend the minyan on a consistent basis but it also alters the pool of people who can lead davening and read Torah.

Tehillah will continue to grow in a community such as Cambridge if it continues to be an economically viable place to live. It’s a much nicer minyan to be davening at than other minyanim in Cambridge. A huge problem is just dealing with maximizing the participation of women when a substantial fraction of participants are in the middle of or have just had kids. There are issues of women and childrearing and the challenge to participation in the minyan because of that.

In an independent minyan that can only be sustained by the involvement of lay leaders and volunteers, challenges such as transience and ensuring that enough people both attend and lead davening are ever-present. Additionally, as a lay-led minyan that strives to adhere to halakha, there are often challenges that arise, from accepting the conversion status of someone who did not convert through the Orthodox movement to selling chametz (leavened products) before Passover, that are generally dealt by rabbis in institutionalized synagogues. Miriam states “I long for an established shul, with an established rabbi instead of constantly scrambling and working to make a shul that
meets twice a month. I wish it [Tehillah] was more established and existed outside of me.” Miriam, as an active lay leader of the minyan who believes in the philosophy of Tehillah, nevertheless acknowledges the challenges that this minyan faces in light of its independence. Tehillah does not have a rabbi and therefore relies on the knowledge of the lay leaders of the minyan and the resources provided by Mechon Hadar. Many members of the minyan feel as though a halakhic advisor (i.e. someone who is literate in halakha and committed to the philosophy of the minyan) is a necessarily addition to the Tehillah so that timely answers can be provided to halakhic challenges that arise. Of course, this raises a host of other challenges of not only logistics but also of finances.

In spite of the aforementioned challenges, Tehillah continues to be a growing community that engages men and women in not only prayer but also in leadership opportunities and constructive dialogue about the logistical and halakhic challenges that are present. The phenomena of challenges that confront Tehillah are reflective of its status as an independent minyan and partnership minyan but also of a prayer community consisting of thoughtful individuals engaged in fruitful discourse and concerned about all aspects of the present and future of the minyan. These challenges not only reveal tensions and disagreement but also allow the minyan to develop and mature by the community confronting these challenges.
Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper I have researched which factors construct the identity of an “Orthodox feminist.” Although I have titled this paper “Educating an Orthodox Feminist,” my research has indicated that not necessarily can all of those interviewed be appropriately labeled both Orthodox and feminist. Many of those interviewed have moved away from the identity of an Orthodox Jew. Some of those interviewed are also hesitant or impartial to using the term ‘feminist’ to self-describe. Based on my research, I would like to further clarify that the term Orthodox feminist implies that all of those interviewed have been raised in Orthodox homes, educational and religious institutions and environments and now identify as members of a prayer community that exemplifies how feminism (or the maximized participation of and sensitivity to women) is expressed in an Orthodox setting.

The title of my thesis, “Educating an Orthodox Feminist: Male and Female” was purposeful because I wanted to emphasize that the educational experiences of both men and women in partnership minyanim are important to research. A partnership minyan is unlike traditional Orthodox minyanim that have no formal place for women within public Jewish ritual and prayer leading. It is also unlike fully egalitarian minyanim that could be led entirely by men or entirely by women because no distinction is made between the genders. Rather, partnership minyanim demand the participation of men and women in their services, with Kabbalat Shabbat, Psukei D’Zimrah and the Torah service designated for women and with Shacharit, Mincha, Musaf and Ma’ariv designated for men.
Since men and women play active roles in partnership minyanim, it is important to acknowledge how both genders came to become involved with Minyan Tehillah and that is why I included both men and women in this study. I found that while men and women may have some differing experiences, generalizations cannot be made about the experiences and perspectives of each gender. It is difficult to distinguish between both genders in terms of the influence of their parental role models and their attitudes toward their experiences in Jewish Studies classes, prayer and their year of study in Israel.

Additionally, it is not possible to categorize what a ‘male Orthodox’ versus ‘female Orthodox’ perspective is on Modern Orthodoxy, feminism, partnership minyanim and Minyan Tehillah because the variety of perspectives on each topic are relayed by both genders. For example, both men and women have stated that their participation in Tehillah can be validated because it is a halakhic minyan. As well, male and female study participants have both discussed the ethical reasons for their participation in Tehillah and for their support of egalitarianism. Similarly, both men and women addressed their disappointment in Modern Orthodoxy and addressed challenges of partnership minyanim and Minyan Tehillah in particular. It is therefore not specifically gender but rather the interplay of the experiences in the home, school and community that educates and influences an “Orthodox feminist.”

The dissatisfaction with the current level of egalitarianism at Tehillah, the intensification of feminist feelings and the case made for Tehillah moving toward full egalitarianism can be understood as sentiments that are held by some "second generation" Orthodox feminists. These include individuals who were raised within
educational systems and households where they were exposed to the maximization of women's participation within Jewish ritual and are now pushing for more progress.

By researching and analyzing the identities of these individuals I have learned that just as the term Orthodox feminist is complex, so too are the identities of those interviewed. Initially I sought to find out how an Orthodox feminist is educated and how one develops parts of their identity that attract them to partnership minyanim. After interviewing fifteen members of Tehillah and analyzing these interviews, I have learned that it is impossible to make a blanket statement about what makes an Orthodox feminist. Rather, there are multiple evident trends, factors and past experiences that interviewees share with in common. These include the influence of mothers and fathers and the role of parents in shaping one’s identity; the Bat Mitzvah as an opportunity to mark through Jewish ritual the coming of age as a Jewish adult; critically approaching engagement in Jewish worship and Jewish learning; and the relative parity of Jewish literacy levels in Jewish day school among the interviewees, regardless of whether these individuals attended co-educational, gender-segregated Modern Orthodox or community day schools.

The differences between the trends are not restricted to geographic origin of the interviewees. Rather, many of the differences in trends among the interviewees are highlighted by the difference in age cohort of the study participants. For example, those in their twenties were more likely to be raised by parents, especially mothers, with higher Jewish literacy and education levels who were also professionals, active in the Jewish community and pioneers of women’s tefillah groups compared to those in their thirties who did not necessarily have female role models who could be characterized the
same way. Additionally, those in their twenties generally have reflected more on their relationships with teachers and their experiences learning from teachers who they consider to be their role models, whereas many of the interviewees in their thirties did not go into depth about individual teachers who were very influential. On the other hand, it is not possible to say that those in their twenties and thirties had completely different experiences because in both age cohorts interviewees can be categorized as products of a day school system in which women did not teach Talmud. Thus, there are both similarities and differences among those in each age cohort.

This research has also produced examples of how members of Minyan Tehillah have grown and developed as Jewish learners and leaders. Through reflection on their prayer experiences of both segregation and involvement, members of Tehillah have demonstrated how they have matured and developed their identities as members and leaders of prayer communities beginning in their home congregation and school and continuing into the community of Minyan Tehillah which they have elected to join.

Although the past several decades have witnessed unprecedented parity in terms of the Jewish educational opportunities afforded to both males and females in the Modern Orthodox world, the equal opportunities in this educational system can be regarded as only one component of one’s Jewish identity as an “Orthodox feminist.” Experiences outside of the day school classroom are also integral to identity building, as Jewish education and more generally socialization does not occur in a vacuum. This study has shown that to be the case because all other components of one’s education – formal and informal – have equally been integral in shaping the religious identity and commitment of the interviewees. Jewish literacy, text skills, familiarity with Jewish
prayer and the ability to peruse halakhic sources (such as on partnership minyanim) have all been acquired by the interviewees and in most cases they have been acquired in a co-educational environment with both genders actively participating in the learning and growing process together. These are, therefore, some ways that the day school education of the participants of this study has contributed to how they grapple with and have been shaped by Orthodoxy and feminism, and partnership minyanim in particular.

The participants of this study have not traveled along a straight trajectory toward their involvement in Minyan Tehillah. Interviewees have encountered both continuity and discontinuity throughout their lives and experiences in both formal and informal Jewish education. For example, within an interviewee's family there may have been continuity in terms of Jewish observance, practice and values but within educational institutions there may have been discontinuity. Some interviewees have experienced this discontinuity as they transitioned from one Jewish day school to another. Others experienced discontinuity from the educational environment of their day school when it came to their experiences of higher Jewish learning in Israel.

Interviewees may have also experienced discontinuity with regard to their prayer experiences. Although many interviewees were exposed to women’s involvement in Jewish prayer, study and communal leadership, independent minyanim such as Tehillah have only proliferated in the past five to ten years and were therefore not prayer communities in which these interviewees were raised from birth. The precursor of the partnership minyan is the women’s tefillah group and many (female) interviewees have mentioned their exposure to, if not involvement in these groups.
Thus, the exposure of interviewees to partnership minyanim after having participated in women's *tefillah* groups could also be considered a discontinuity.

It is difficult to predict how partnership minyanim, such as Tehillah, will transform in the future. It is possible that these minyanim will become fully egalitarian over time. It is also possible that these minyanim will turn into institutionalized synagogues with a paid rabbi, board of directors and a physical building owned by the minyan to cater to a growing population. The needs of the members of these minyanim are also likely to change over time, such as the need for an institution to cater to lifecycle events from birth to burial. So too will the ideology and goals of the minyan. Thus it is possible that the disunity and relative tension between the opinions of the interviewees, as exhibited by their perspectives on Modern Orthodoxy, partnership minyanim and Tehillah, will lead to the development of break-off minyanim in the future.

Other trends that arose in this research include the challenges and disappointments that many interviewees experienced during their year of post-secondary school study at yeshiva or seminary in Israel and the disparaging and cynical attitudes that many interviewees hold toward both the Modern Orthodox movement and the future of Modern Orthodoxy. Entering this research, I expected that many of those interviewed would have stated that because of their Jewish literacy, particularly in *halakhic* sources, they understand and defend the validity and existence of partnership minyanim and that as individuals and as a community they can simultaneously be both Orthodox and feminist, traditional yet progressive.
What I found, however, was that many of them no longer identify as Orthodox Jews and many are interested in not only justifying partnership minyanim but also justifying and advocating for egalitarianism in Jewish prayer and see it as either a halakhic or ethical imperative (or both) to ensure that women are included equally in Jewish ritual. Just as there has been a trend toward post-denominationalism in the 21st century, so too has there been a trend toward the evolution of and involvement in independent minyanim that legitimize egalitarianism and blur the boundaries that movements of Judaism have erected. Most independent minyanim are both maximizing the opportunities for involvement of women (or promoting fully egalitarian prayer) and retaining traditional Jewish liturgy within their prayer services. 47 The identities of those interviewed illustrate this trend because all are involved with a prayer community that is not affiliated with a particular movement of Judaism but rather draws elements of different movements of Judaism that are relevant to the contemporary Jew. Thus, this paper contributes to the field of study of independent minyanim and partnership minyanim which can be classified as growing trends in contemporary Jewish life.

47 Steven Cohen, Shawn Landres, Elie Kaunfer, Michelle Shain, Emergent Jewish Communities and Their Participants: Preliminary Findings from the 2007 National Spiritual Communities Study.
Glossary of Terms

Aliyah (plural: aliyyot): lit. ascent (to the Torah to recite the Torah blessings); it can also refer to immigration to the State of Israel
Agunah (plural: Agunot): lit. chained woman – the title given to a woman who is refused a Jewish divorce by her husband
Ba’alat Tshuva: someone who returns to the faith (becomes religious)
Bimah: raised area in a synagogue from where the Torah is read
Daven(ing): Yiddish word for pray or praying
Challot: loaves of bread traditionally eaten on Shabbat
Chazzan(im): cantor (or leader of the service)
Chevreh Kadisha: Jewish burial society
D’var Torah: words of Torah
Eruv: constructed communal boundary that allows for things to be carried during Shabbat from the public to the private and vice-versa
Frum: Yiddish word for religious
Gabbai(im): a person who assists in running the synagogue service
Gemarah: section of the Talmud which contains the records of the rabbis’ discussions
Hagba’ah: lifting the Torah
Haftarah: selection from Prophetic literature read following the Torah reading in synagogue
HaMotzi: blessing over the bread
Halakha (plural: halakhot): Jewish law
Havdallah: ceremony that distinguishes the rest of the week from Shabbat
Hevrutah (plural: hevrutot): learning partner(s)
Humash: Pentateuch
Kabbalat Shabbat: service to welcome the Sabbath
Kevod Ha-Tsibur: honor of the community
Lashon Harah: evil speech
Layn: Yiddish for read (referring to Torah reading)
Limudei Kodesh: lit. holy studies (referred to Jewish Studies)
Ma’ariv: evening service
Megillah: scroll (of Esther)
Mehitzah: a curtain or divider separating men and women during prayer
Midrash: rabbinic commentary (on the Tanakh)
Minchah: afternoon service
Minyan(im): quorum (necessary for beginning a religious service)
Mishnah: Jewish oral law
Mussar: Jewish ethics
Perek: chapter
P’sukei D’Zimrah: introductory psalms
Rosh Hodesh: New Moon (Jewish holiday celebrating the new month)
Seder: communal ceremony and meal conducted on the first two nights of Passover
Sefer Torah: Torah scroll
Shabbat Kallah: a bride’s Shabbat celebration prior to her wedding
Shacharit: morning service
Shaliach Tzibbur (plural: shlichei tzibbur): service leader(s)
Shanah Bet: second year (refers to the second year of post-high school studies in Israel)
Shiur(im): refers to the type of learning that takes place in seminaries and yeshivot
Shiva: Jewish seven day mourning period
Shul: Yiddish word for synagogue
Siddurim: prayer books
Simhat Torah: Rejoicing of the Law (Jewish holiday)
Tanakh: Bible
Tallit(ot): prayer shawl
Tefillah: prayer
Tefillin: phylacteries
Tosbah: abbreviation for Torah She’beal Peh (Jewish oral law)
Tu B’Shvat: New Year for the Trees (Jewish holiday)
Torah U’Maddah: lit. Torah and science (idiom for valuing Jewish and secular studies and combining them within a school curriculum)
Yom Tov: holiday
Z’man Geramah: time-bound (referring to the time-bound commandments from which women are exempt)
Appendix A: Interview Script

I really appreciate you taking the time to be interviewed. I’m interested in learning about the backgrounds of people who participate in partnership minyanim, especially their Jewish education. In this interview I will ask you about your family background and experiences growing up, your formal schooling, and your experiences in Minyan Tehillah. I am typing up notes on the interview so that I will have a good record of what you say.

1. Background/General Information
   a) What kind of Jewish experiences did you have growing up? (family, youth groups, synagogue, Hillel, college Jewish life)
   b) What did it mean to be Jewish in your family?
   c) What kinds of connections to Jewish communities and to synagogue life did you have growing up?
   d) Are there particular Jewish educational role models (family, teachers, rabbis) who you feel have influenced you growing up?
   e) Do you have children? What sort of Jewish identity and Jewish values are you imparting to them or wish to impart to them?

2. Formal Jewish Education
   a) Tell me about your experiences at Jewish day school and what stands out as you reflect back onto them.
   b) Where did you go to elementary school? High school?
   c) What were your limudei kodesh classes like? What were your teachers like?
   d) What was the structure of tefillah at your day school? What were your experiences like during tefillah? How did you feel about tefillah as part of your curriculum?

3. Modern Orthodoxy and Feminism
   a) What does it mean to you to have grown up Modern Orthodox?
   b) What has been your experience with women’s involvement within a Modern Orthodox context (family, synagogue, community, school)?
   c) What does it mean to you to have been given a Modern Orthodox day school education?
   d) How do you think your identity and experiences as a Modern Orthodox Jew has differed from that of your parents’ generation? How will Modern Orthodox differ in the future from what it is like today?
   e) Did you spend time in Israel post-high school at a yeshiva or seminary? What was your experience there like?

4. Partnership Minyanim
   a) When did you first learn about partnership minyanim?
   b) When did you first learn about Minyan Tehillah?
   c) What has been and what is your leadership role within Tehillah?
d) What has attracted you to Minyan Tehillah?
e) Is there anything about this minyan that poses challenges for you?
f) Some rabbinic halakhic decisors (poskim) argue that these minyanim are permissible according to a traditionally understood, "Orthodox" understanding of Halakha but that the issues of a lack of women's involvement more has to do with a sociological phenomenon. There are others who say that it isn't permissible. Rabbis Mendl Shapiro and Daniel Sperber have written articles about the halakhic issues regarding these minyanim (both of them are supporters of these minyanim). The articles are available on the JOFA website at www.jofa.org.

I'd like to know if those I am interviewing are aware of halakhic arguments both for and against the existence of this framework of Jewish prayer and if they're aware of the contentious nature of the topic of women's increased participation within Jewish public ritual and what they think about that.

g) How do your parents feel about this kind of minyan?
h) How do rabbis view these minyanim as you encounter them?
i) Do you feel spiritually fulfilled davening in this kind of minyan?
j) Is davening in this minyan as complete of a synagogue experience as your shul growing up?

5. Closing
a) Is there anything that you would like to add?
b) Are there any questions that I should have asked but didn’t?
Appendix B: Thesis Framework Template

Pseudonym: Age and Occupation:

Family Background

Formative Experiences:

Relationships with (female) relatives:

Jewish Education

Teachers:

Jewish Studies Curriculum:

Gender:

Israel Experiences:

Perspectives

Current (family) Status and Outlook:

Modern Orthodoxy:

Gender Roles and Feminism:

Partnership Minyanim (introduction to, involvement, justification, participation):

Minyan Tehillah:
### Appendix C: Overview of Interview Participants

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(and Minyan Tehillah’s Ritual Committee Description of Ritual Practices and Record of Decisions, 2009)


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