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Abstract

Since Modern Orthodox Jews are expected to strictly adhere to Jewish law, parts of which give women fewer rights than men, it might seem to be at odds with the feminist notion that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. However, there are many people in the United States who identify as both a Modern Orthodox Jew and a feminist. This thesis works to examine the intricacies of how Modern Orthodox men and women, who also believe in gender equality, navigate their beliefs toward these two seemingly contradictory ideologies. I explore various aspects of Modern Orthodoxy – from prayer to dress to divorce – to see how men and women reconciled or not their potentially conflicting beliefs. What I found is that, while some women do work to gain more rights for women within Modern Orthodoxy, this is not always the case. While all of the men and women in my study supported full gender equality within the secular sphere, in the religious sphere many were more supportive of ideologies that they had come to understand as “normal,” and were therefore comfortable with. These ideologies generally upheld the gender binary, in which women and men are not given the same rights. Some of these women consciously articulate the distinction between an appropriate egalitarian gender system in the secular world and an appropriate non-egalitarian, differentiated gender system in the Modern Orthodox world. Others, however, do not fully articulate or recognize that they are making such a distinction between their religious and secular sphere. There are other women, however, who were uncomfortable with the current gender binary in Modern Orthodoxy, and either advocated for change or reinterpreted various traditions that aligned with their feminist ideology. Importantly, I found that the feminist women in my study are acting with agency as they choose to engage in Modern Orthodoxy, even if it does deprive them of certain rights. Still, there are societal norms, which I will unpack, that make certain societally created gender binaries appear natural, which many of my participants did not question. This thesis aims to uncover and explore such taken-for-granted assumptions, and it works to contribute to larger studies within anthropology through critiquing the notion that feminists are necessarily full advocates for gender equality, and through critiquing the Western notion that people generally hold internally consistent beliefs.
Modern Orthodox feminism is something that has always been around me, even before I knew there was an official term for the movement. I grew up in a town where approximately 50% of the population was Jewish, and a large percentage of that was Modern Orthodox. I went to a Modern Orthodox elementary school, middle school, and high school. After high school, I went to a school in Israel for the year, where I continued my Jewish studies in a Modern Orthodox setting. I went to a Modern Orthodox synagogue every Shabbat (Saturday, a holy day for Jews). Suffice to say, I was very much immersed in the Jewish Modern Orthodox world. Largely because of my mother, I was also brought up with a very feminist outlook on life – I believed that women could do everything men could do, and vice versa. For a very long time, I did not see any problem with the way my friends and I lived our lives. We were Modern Orthodox, which in no way conflicted with the fact that we believed in the equality of men and women.

However, when my friends and I were choosing which high schools to go to, my feminism clashed with a friend’s decision – a decision based in Modern Orthodoxy. One of my good friends decided to attend an all girls’ high school that did not teach women Gemara, a commentary on how Jewish law was formed by the rabbis. This confused me, because up until this point in our education, both boys and girls learned Gemara, so I asked my mother why my friend would not be able to continue learning the subject. My mother told me that more strict Modern Orthodox people thought that girls should not learn Gemara, because it was inappropriate for girls to learn such an intense subject matter. Of course, this bothered me, but I wrote this gender inequality off as something that was only practiced by the more
religious sect of Orthodoxy. I went to a high school that allowed both boys and girls to learn *Gemara*, and I was fine.

However, the gender inequality that I wrote off as only being in the stricter parts of Orthodoxy started to pop up everywhere in my life. I realized that I did not know a single female rabbi (Jewish spiritual leader). I had never been explicitly told that women could not be rabbis, but I had, without every questioning why, grown accustomed to the fact that rabbi was a position that only men held. My Modern Orthodox high school had a dress code – girls had to wear skirts that covered the knees and shirts that were not too low cut, and that had sleeves that went halfway to the elbow. Boys also had a dress code as well, which consisted of button down shirts and any pants that were non-blue jeans. However, the boys’ dress code was based on looking respectable, whereas the girls’ dress code was created so we would look appropriate according to Jewish modesty laws—very different concerns. Also in my high school, we had prayer services every morning, which were always led by men or boys. It was not that women did not want to lead the services – we never asked if we could, because we knew that we were not allowed to. These services also had men and women sitting in separate sections. Of course, because the men were leading the service, all of the public aspects of prayer, including reading the *Torah* (Old Testament) and saying blessings out loud, took place on their side of the divider that separated us. Similar practices took place at my synagogue when I attended services on Shabbat.

At first, none of these aspects of Modern Orthodoxy really bothered me, because they were just a part of my Jewish culture. But, as I have already said, my mother was very big on feminism – she instilled in me a sense that men and women should have equal rights. I had no problem with her feminist ideals in the secular world – I agreed with her that both
men and women could be teachers, astronauts, and basketball players. However, her feminist ideology did not know the bounds between the secular world and the Jewish world. My mother believed that men and women should have equal rights in Modern Orthodox Judaism. My mother is not alone in her beliefs – all around me, in this seemingly sexist religious sect, movements and synagogues that support women’s rights are coming to life. People are starting partnership prayer services, which give women more rights; decisions are being made that allow women to wear tefillin [phylacteries],¹ which are traditionally only worn by men; and organizations like JOFA (the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance) are gaining more traction. Still, these decisions and organizations, while important, do not work towards fully equal rights of men and women. In partnership prayer services, there are certain parts of the prayer that only men lead. The decision about women wearing tefillin has been hotly debated. JOFA, which claims to be a feminist organization, does not advocate for fully equal rights, only more rights for women – a subtle, yet important, distinction.

This is where my interest in the subject comes into play. As I continued to grow up in a Modern Orthodox setting, I started to realize that the sect of Judaism that I considered myself to be a part of is inherently sexist. There are certain Jewish laws that a) must be followed and b) differentiate between the rights of men and women, and often times these laws give women less power than men. I did not understand how gender equality could ever be reached in this type of setting, and I decided I would talk to people who are advocating for women’s rights within Modern Orthodoxy to see what their perspectives are. I also decided to explore how ordinary Modern Orthodox women and men (i.e., people who are not

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¹ Tefillin is comprised of two leather boxes, as well as a leather wrapping, that people (usually men) wear, generally during prayer services.
advocating for rights within Modern Orthodoxy) who also see themselves as feminists do or do not reconcile these two positions.

Introduction

What is Modern Orthodoxy?

In order to understand the Modern Orthodox feminist ideology, it is important to understand the basic tenets of Modern Orthodox Judaism, which I will briefly explain below (a fuller explanation can be found in chapter one). Modern Orthodoxy is a sect of Judaism that promotes a strict adherence to *Halacha*, or Jewish law, while still being able to integrate into a secular society. Rabbi Yonah Berman defines Orthodoxy as “a series of beliefs and practices that are loyal to *Halacha*, the ancient interpretation and practice of Jewish law” (Y. Berman, 2014). *Halachot* (plural of *Halacha*) can be found in the Old Testament as well as the Talmud, which is a body of texts that deal with Jewish law and practices. Rabbi Yonah Berman then goes on to distinguish Modern Orthodoxy from other types of Orthodoxy through Modern Orthodoxy’s approach to the secular world. Modern Orthodox Jews do not shy away from the secular world – they embrace it (Y. Berman, 2014).

The embrace of “modernity” within Modern Orthodoxy is how this sect is differentiated from other sects of Orthodoxy. In other, stricter, Orthodox populations, no attempt is made to integrate into the secular community – people in these communities will often live only amongst themselves, and are very stringent when it comes to living their lives according to *Halacha*. On the other hand, Conservative Judaism is thought of as being less
strict than Modern Orthodoxy in terms of preserving the exact Halachot as they are written in the Talmud. Conservative Judaism espouses that Judaism is constantly evolving in order to meet the needs of the Jewish people, and that modern day rabbis can also make decisions about Halacha which will allow more “modern day” needs to be met.\(^2\) Therefore, Conservative Judaism is considered to be a bit more secular than Modern Orthodoxy.

The fact that Modern Orthodoxy attempts to fully abide by millennia-old Halacha while being a part of the modern world creates an interesting dilemma that is absent in the other two sects of Judaism that I have described here. Many Halachot are relatively easily integrated into the modern world. For example, Modern Orthodoxy requires that people observe Shabbat from Friday evening until Saturday evening. A strict observance of Shabbat means people are not allowed to use technology, cook, or drive, which is not particularly problematic for Modern Orthodox Jews in the United States, partially because Saturday is a day of rest for the majority of the country. People are not expected to go into work on Saturday, so Modern Orthodox Jews are not faced with a conflict about attending work or observing Shabbat.

However, not all areas of Jewish law and the secular world are so compatible. Rabbi Saul Berman, a prominent Modern Orthodox rabbi, stresses that there are “areas of powerful inconsistency and conflict between Torah and modern culture that need to be filtered out in order to preserve the integrity of Halacha” (S. Berman, 2001). Rabbi Saul Berman’s statement holds within it two key aspects of Modern Orthodox Judaism. The first is that there are times when the secular world and Halacha will conflict, and the second is that, for Modern Orthodox Jews, Halacha must take precedence. It is with this in mind that I would

like to introduce the conflict that I see between the feminist movement and Modern Orthodoxy.

**Feminism and Modern Orthodoxy**

The feminist movement, in its current form, can be defined as “the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary.)

Many of the people whom I interviewed agree with this feminist ideal and, in secular settings, advocate for equal opportunity for men and women. They believe, for instance, that women should have the same job opportunities as men, receive the same amount of pay for the same amount of work, and share equally split household responsibilities. They are, for all secular intents and purposes, feminists.

However, there are many *Halachot* that directly conflict with the notion of gender equality in Jewish practice. In the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 24:1 presents how divorce occurs according to Jewish law. It reads, “when a man taketh a wife, and marrieth her, then it cometh to pass, if she find no favor in his eyes, because he hath found some unseemly thing in her, that he writeth her a bill of divorcement, and giveth it in her hand, and sendeth her out of his house” (Mechon-Mamre). The bill of divorcement is called a *get* in Jewish law, and the sages interpret this passage to mean that a man must willingly give the *get* to his wife, which means it is impossible for a woman to initiate the divorce (she can request it, but can do nothing if her husband says no). There are many ways rabbis today try to get around this law, for example through striving to coerce the man to give his wife a *get*. However, at the very root of the law, there is a necessity for the man to take action in order for a divorce

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to occur, which puts the woman in a more vulnerable position. This law gives women limited power in divorce, and the laws of betrothal echo the lack of women’s rights. In the Talmud, the laws surrounding betrothal explain that if a man gives money to a woman and says “to me you are betrothed,” the betrothal is effective, yet if a woman gives money to a man and says “to me you are betrothed,” no betrothal has taken place (Kiddushin 5b). Here again we see different roles for men and women in Halacha, with men taking a significantly more active role than women.

Both of these examples have to do with a more private realm of life, but the lack of equality for men and women is also evident in the public sphere. The Talmud dictates, “All matters of sanctity should not involve less than ten men” (Megillah 23b). These “matters of sanctity,” also called Devarim she-b’kiddusha, include certain aspects of prayer and mourning rituals, all of which are supposed to take place in the public sphere. The way this law plays out is that there are certain aspects of prayer that women cannot lead, so as long as Halacha\textsuperscript{5} is strictly followed, there will always be certain aspects of public prayer that necessitate a man’s presence. For many Modern Orthodox synagogues, this translates into men taking on all public leading roles for prayer services, with women having no involvement in leading prayer. There are some synagogues that do allow women to lead certain parts of the prayer service, which I will talk about more in chapter three, but there are people within Modern Orthodoxy who oppose these women-led services. As opposed to the laws that have to do with betrothal and divorce (which can have devastating effects on women—see chapter 6), the law of Devarim she-b’kiddusha involving men generates gender

\textsuperscript{5} Here I mean Halacha as it is written in the Talmud. According to Conservative Judaism, certain aspects of Halacha can be rewritten, but here I am referring specifically to a Modern Orthodox interpretation of Halacha.
inequality in the public sphere, because it affords men much easier access to being public religious figures.

There are many more examples of gender inequality in *Halacha*, several of which I will address throughout this thesis. However, what I would now like to do is shift the focus onto why this is an issue in Modern Orthodox Judaism. As I have already mentioned, Modern Orthodox Judaism tries to incorporate modern day ideas and practices into their *Halacha*-observing lifestyle. How, then, is it possible for Modern Orthodox Jews to incorporate the secular notions of gender equality into a community that observes laws that give men and women different (and unequal) rights?

Unlike in Modern Orthodoxy, the conflict between modern feminist ideals and traditional *Halacha* does not pose as much of a problem in either Conservative Judaism or “not modern” Orthodox Judaism. Since Conservative Judaism dictates that modern rabbinical leaders can make amendments to *Halacha*, Conservative Judaism has adopted an egalitarian view of men and women’s rights, particularly in the public sphere.\(^6\) For example, women are allowed to count in the quorum of ten that I spoke about earlier, and women are allowed to be rabbis, which is also prohibited in Modern Orthodoxy. On the other end of the spectrum, “not modern” Orthodox Jews do not have to grapple with the conflict of *Halacha* and women’s rights, because they isolate themselves from the secular world, and therefore do not give much thought to the feminist movement.\(^7\) This is why I decided to look specifically at Modern Orthodox feminism in this thesis, but I will also be referencing some Conservative and Orthodox traditions throughout, in order to give some perspective on women’s rights in

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\(^6\) Please note that I am unsure of Conservative ruling in terms of divorce, but I am meeting with a Conservative rabbi soon and I will have the answer then.

\(^7\) Here I am speaking of the sect as a whole, as I am sure there is some deviation from this on an individual level, even in the more strict Orthodox communities.
Judaism. The central questions that I hope to answer through my research involve how the interesting position of being Modern Orthodox – being situated in a modern, secular world, while also asserting the importance of *Halacha* – impacts people’s ideas surrounding women’s rights. I am exploring how men and women feel about women’s rights within a Modern Orthodox context, and look to see if and how these feelings are influenced by secular notions of gender equality.

It is important to note that not all people abide by the ideas that I wrote about earlier in terms of what Modern Orthodoxy is compared to Conservative Judaism. Some of the people I interviewed believe that Modern Orthodoxy entails a strict adherence to *Halacha*, whereas Conservative Judaism allows people to not abide by *Halacha*. This is not entirely the case, because Conservative Judaism does push for the strict adherence to *Halacha*, just as in Modern Orthodoxy. The key difference, as I have already said, is that the Conservative movement is of the opinion that certain *Halachot* can be changed in order to accommodate modern times. However, people who affiliate with the Conservative movement often tend to be less strict about their observance of *Halacha*, which is why people associate Conservative Judaism with a lenience towards *Halacha*, while they view Modern Orthodoxy as strict adherence to *Halacha*. This difference is important because many people in the Modern Orthodox feminist movement seem to appreciate the ideas supported by Conservative Judaism, but many Modern Orthodox feminists feel as though Conservative Judaism is too lenient for them, and therefore they continue to abide by Modern Orthodox law. Still, other people do understand the technical difference between Conservative Judaism and Modern Orthodoxy, and, even though they believe in women’s rights within Judaism, these people continue to abide by Modern Orthodox law. Why these women (and men) choose to remain
faithful to an arguably sexist sect of a religion is something I will look into later on in this thesis.

Importantly, though many of my participants are women who are immersed in a culture that does not afford women the same rights as men, I am in no way suggesting that these women are not acting with agency. In anthropologist Saba Mahmood’s *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, she writes about women of the Islamist Movement in Egypt who actively choose to learn about, partake in and uphold Islam, a patriarchal religion. She explains that some feminist theories assert that women, when given the option, will always advocate for women’s rights, and therefore women who do not, such as the women in the Egyptian Islamist movement Mahmood studied, must be under the influence of a “grand patriarchal plan” (2005: 1). Like Mahmood, I argue that the women in my study, while they are partaking in a culture that generally gives men more rights than women, are not doing so because of false consciousness. Mahmood goes on to argue that the women she worked with acted with agency, which she defines as, “the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles” (2005: 8). Mahmood is making the point that these women are acting autonomously, even if they are choosing to submit to rituals that may take away some of their rights. Similarly, I discovered that many of the women in my study are purposefully choosing to live Modern Orthodox lives, even when it strips them of certain rights.

While I do believe that many young Modern Orthodox feminist women are acting with agency when they actively pursue and uphold a Modern Orthodox lifestyle, I will at times talk about how Modern Orthodox society perpetuates certain ideas in such a way that they become embedded in the culture to the point that they are not even noticed. For
example, rabbis, who are religious leaders within Jewish community, must be male according to Modern Orthodoxy. This idea has become so embedded within Modern Orthodox culture that very few of my participants questioned why this might be, and whether or not it was actually *Halachically* required that rabbis be male. In cases like these, I will point out that people are not always pushing for women’s rights in areas where women can *Halachically* have more rights, and how this illustrates that people often do submit to their societal norm without questioning why. The societal norms that I am referencing here generally fall in what Pierre Bourdieu called the realm of “doxic” ideas. Bourdieu explained doxa as, “that which is taken for granted” or that which is “undiscussed” (1977: 166-168). Bourdieu argues that these doxic ideas are so powerful because people do not think to question them. Within Modern Orthodoxy these doxic, societal norms perpetuate the patriarchy that already exists within Modern Orthodoxy, and precisely because they are doxic, they are abided by unquestioningly. By adhering to these norms, my female participants are taking part in this perpetuation.

Crucially, however, I do not wish to argue that, if these women did have full agency or awareness, they would necessarily choose to overthrow these norms. As I explained earlier, some of the women whom I spoke with had thought very deeply about these norms, and still choose to live within the system that perpetuates them, similarly to the women in Saba Mahmood’s study. Like many people, the women in my study have multiple values, and for these women, Modern Orthodoxy and the *Halachic* system are values that can at times take precedence over feminism, which does not mean that they are not acting in an agentive manner.
Overall, this study looks at how Modern Orthodox Jews who believe in gender equality navigate their two overlapping worlds in terms of their divergent views on women. I explore ways in which the feminists within Modern Orthodox have made steps towards giving women more rights, and I will address the question of if gender equality is even possible within the confines of Modern Orthodoxy. In order to do so, I will address various aspects of Modern Orthodox practice in terms of the differing roles of men and women. I will also address the feelings of other Modern Orthodox people, who are not looking to change the current gender roles, and explore why they feel the way they do, and how they are able to reconcile these feelings with their more feminist ideologies.

**Methods and Participants**

Because of Modern Orthodox Judaism’s take on modernity and *Halacha*, I believe it is the sect of Judaism that has the most to grapple with in terms of how to navigate the differences with regards to women’s rights. This is why I have decided to research people’s views of feminism and women’s rights within the confines of Modern Orthodoxy. My goal is to get a better understanding of how women and men who identify as feminists (or support feminist ideas) approach the rights of women within Modern Orthodoxy. I am looking to see if men and women find the gender differences in Modern Orthodoxy to be problematic at all, and, if they do, how they grapple with these issues.

I conducted the bulk of my fieldwork in two main locations, both of which I chose due to their relatively large Modern Orthodox communities. The first is Brandeis University, a small liberal arts school in Massachusetts, and the second is in Rosebelt, a largely middle

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8 While Brandeis University is a real institution, all other places, including towns and synagogues, and people, are pseudonyms. I decided to keep the name of Brandeis because it is a very unique
class, suburban town in northern New Jersey. I formally interviewed fourteen men and women in their twenties through sixties about their thoughts on Modern Orthodoxy’s approach to women’s rights. Additionally, I spoke informally with many more Modern Orthodox and feminist people in the context of daily interactions about their views on women’s rights within secular and religious spheres. I would like to note that, at some points during my analysis in the coming chapters, I will differentiate between younger and older participants, as often times the views of the two groups differed in interesting ways. When I refer to my younger participants, I am referring to the students at Brandeis University, ranging between the ages of twenty and twenty-three, and when I refer to older participants, I am referring to all of my other participants from Rosebelt? (the youngest of whom is in their early thirties and the oldest of whom is in their late sixties). The majority of the people I interviewed identify as Modern Orthodox and feminists, but some would not give themselves these titles for various reasons, which I will discuss in detail in chapter two. Most of the people whom I interviewed grew up Modern Orthodox, and went to Modern Orthodox schools throughout their lives. A great many of them, particularly the younger participants, also went on gap-year programs in Israel between high school and college, during which they continued their Judaic studies. Some of the people whom I spoke with grew up as Conservative Jews, but they now associate more with Modern Orthodoxy, or spend the majority of their time in the Modern Orthodox community.

institution. There is a thriving Modern Orthodox community on campus, meaning there are enough people that exposing the name of the University will not jeopardize the confidentiality of my participants. Additionally, the campus culture is very unique, in that it promotes interaction between Modern Orthodox students and all other students on campus, and the Modern Orthodox students are constantly surrounded by, and engage in, conversations about secular culture, such as feminism. It is because I felt the culture of the campus was an important one for situating my research that I decided to use the real name.
In addition to my interviews, I also partook in “participant observation” fieldwork, by spending time with Modern Orthodox people throughout the day, joining in on their conversations and observing their actions, and also by attending a variety of Modern Orthodox events. During my fieldwork, I went to traditional Modern Orthodox services, as well as some newer, more left wing Modern Orthodox services that give women a more participatory role, in order to see firsthand what roles women held. I also went to various places, including a variety of synagogues and prayer sites, in order to get a sense of what these areas felt like.

Additionally, I conducted a great deal of research through analyzing important Modern Orthodox texts, including the Bible and the Talmud. Due to my background as a formerly Modern Orthodox young woman, I have previously studied many of these texts extensively, and was therefore able to look at them to see what they have to say about specific Halachot (Jewish Laws).

At the start of my study, I assumed that my past as a Modern Orthodox woman, and my extensive knowledge about Halacha, would mean that I would be unsurprised by the perspectives of my participants. I naively assumed that I had “heard it all before,” and that I would not learn much new about how men and women navigate their feelings about the treatment of women in Modern Orthodoxy. However, I could not have been more wrong. My fieldwork has given me a new appreciation for the ways in which people are able to navigate various aspects of their lives and beliefs. Through the next six chapters, I hope to shed light on the complex and interesting notions of what it means to be an advocate for women’s rights within the confines of an inherently patriarchal society, and to show the differing ways in which people deal with their sometimes opposing ideologies.
Modern Orthodoxy: A Brief History

The majority of my thesis concerns how men and women within the Modern Orthodox community navigate their feelings surrounding women’s rights. Through my interviews, I discovered that many people have feelings and opinions regarding this topic that are often in tension. In order to develop a better understanding of why this is, it is important to understand some of the basic tenets of Modern Orthodoxy. Therefore, this chapter will be devoted to both unpacking certain crucial aspects of Modern Orthodox Judaism, and to looking at how people define what Modern Orthodoxy means to them.

Modern Orthodoxy is a sect of Judaism that originated in the nineteenth century in Europe. Before this time, during the Enlightenment, Jews were granted more rights within the larger society, which created a rift amongst some Jews. One group of Jews felt that they should embrace modernity, and assimilate into the larger culture around them. Partially in reaction to this assimilation, a second group emerged that shunned all forms of modernity and rigorously observed Halacha (Jewish law). Modern Orthodoxy came about in the space that these diverging groups left in their wake – it offered a kind of Judaism in which people...
would still strictly adhere to Halacha, while still engaging with the secular world (Schachter 2002: 416).

When Modern Orthodoxy made its way to the United States in the 1920-30s, it kept to the same idea that European Modern Orthodoxy was founded on. Its motto was “Torah Umadda,” which translates into “Torah and worldly knowledge” (Van Biema & Tyrangiel 2000). Here again, we see the two main aspects of Modern Orthodoxy – strictly adhering to Halacha, while still interacting with the secular world. In order to gain more of an understanding of what it means to maintain a lifestyle that abides by the “Torah Umadda” ideal, it is important to understand what both Torah and madda (worldly knowledge) mean.

One of the most important aspects of the Torah piece of the Modern Orthodox lifestyle is Halacha.\(^9\) Halacha, or Halachot in its plural form, is a set of Jewish laws that dictate most aspects of people’s lives. There are laws ranging from what one can and cannot eat, called kashrut laws, to laws regarding what people are allowed to do on Saturday, which is considered a holy day in Judaism, to laws about how people are supposed to dress. Norman Lamm writes, “It is the halakhah that governs his daily activities in all areas of life, from the most critical to the most minute” (1994: 7). Halacha truly is omnipresent in the life of a Modern Orthodox person, even when s/he is doing something that is seemingly unrelated to Judaism.

Halachot come from two main sources – the first five books of the Old Testament, known in Judaism as the Torah She-bichtav, or the Written Torah, and the Torah She-Be’al Peh, or the Oral Torah. According to Modern Orthodox tradition, both of these texts were given by God to Moses at Mount Sinai, and they are considered to be primary sources for the

\(^9\) It is not only Modern Orthodox Jews that abide by these Halachot. There are many people in other denominations of Judaism that also abide by these laws, but for the sake of simplicity, in my paper I will be focusing on Modern Orthodox people who follow these laws.
Halachot that dictate the lives of Modern Orthodox Jews today. Since both of these texts were given by God, they are considered to be divine law, and thus unchangeable. While the Torah She-Be’al Peh was originally passed down orally, it was eventually written down in the Mishnah, so today there is a fixed set of books that people are able to reference when looking for Halachot that come from the Torah She-Be’al Peh. In addition to the Torah She-bichtav and the Mishnah, the Gemara, which is comprised of a series of rabbinical debates and decisions concerning ideas and laws in the Mishnah, is the other main source of Halachot in Modern Orthodoxy is the Gemara.

Often times, a more general principle in Modern Orthodoxy, such as any of the laws I mentioned above (keeping Shabbat, keeping kashrut, and dressing appropriately) is comprised of multiple Halachot, some of which originate in the Torah She-bichtav and some of which come from the Mishnah or Gemara. For example, most of the laws of keeping Shabbat are not stated in the Torah She-bichtav. There are some that are explicitly mentioned, such as the prohibition of starting or putting out a fire, as it says, “Ye shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations upon the Sabbath day” (Exodus, 35:3). However, many of the Halachot of Shabbat that Modern Orthodox Jews follow come from the Mishnah and Gemara. In fact, there is an entire book of Gemara that is dedicated to understanding, explaining, and decreeing laws that must be carried out on Shabbat. Some of these laws expand upon the original decree from Exodus, including a law that states that if a man’s house is on fire on Shabbat, he may not save more food than is necessary from his burning house, lest he may come to extinguish the fire, which is prohibited (Shabbat, 117b). This is just one of many possible examples to show how the Torah She-bichtav and the Mishna and

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10 A book of Gemara is called a mesechet, or tractate, and is generally a compilation of debates, ideas, and laws that are sorted based on subject. The book dedicated to the laws of Shabbat is called mesechet Shabbat.
Gemara hold within them Halachot that come together to guide what Modern Orthodox people are allowed, and expected, to do.

As opposed to Torah, which can be found in the Torah She-bichtav, as well as the Mishna and Gemara, Madda (wordly knowledge) does not come from a prescribed text. Rather, it is a term applied to most aspects of the secular world. It can include art, science, television, and almost any other cultural trend. The ideal Modern Orthodox Jew is someone who embraces these aspects of life in addition to Halacha in order to have an even greater appreciation for God and His creations.

I believe this last part of Modern Orthodoxy is critical, and warrants further attention – in Modern Orthodoxy, Madda is important in that it can help us be closer to God. That is to say, the ideal that Modern Orthodoxy is striving towards is not that people simply appreciate the secular world. Rather, the hope is that aspects of the secular world are able to lead people to have an even greater appreciation of God and their religious life.

Clearly, there are a many interesting and important aspects of Modern Orthodox Judaism – far too many for me to be able to properly elucidate through the course of this chapter. Up until this point, I have written about some of the key features of Modern Orthodoxy, but let me now summarize what each of these key components are:

1) Modern Orthodoxy is a form of Judaism that proposes that people can lead Halachic11 lifestyles while still engaging with the modern world.

2) These Halachot must be followed, and are pervasive throughout a Modern Orthodox person’s life.

3) Secular aspects of a person’s life are important, and can help bring him/her closer to God.

11 Halachic is a term that roughly translates to doing something that abides by Halacha.
Individual Takes on Modern Orthodoxy

Today, Modern Orthodox people continue to abide by the standards set in place by their predecessors, simultaneously following Halacha (Jewish law) while also embracing modernity. Modern Orthodox people often go to secular universities, hold jobs in the secular world, and stay up to date with secular trends, all while maintaining a Halachic lifestyle.

The people that I interviewed for this thesis all had a very clear idea of what Modern Orthodoxy is, as well as what Torah Umadda is, but different people highlight different aspects as important, which I will explore further below.

One part of Modern Orthodoxy that all of my participants seemed to highlight is the idea that Halachot are incredibly important, and equally important is the idea that they cannot be changed. One of my informants, Shira Barto, a Modern Orthodox student at Brandeis University, explained Modern Orthodoxy as follows:

Okay, so, Orthodoxy in general means not changing Jewish law, and following the letter of the law as closely as we can. And Modern Orthodoxy as a subcategory within that means that while we are keeping Jewish law, we can still engage in the modern world. So for example, using computers, being involved in media and politics, the fact that you can have a profession outside the Jewish world specifically, that all falls under the category of Modern Orthodoxy.

The prevailing idea that comes through this statement is that Modern Orthodoxy expects people to both follow and not make any changes to the Halacha, while also interacting with the modern, secular world. Sharon Weiss, another student at Brandeis University, had a similar sentiment about Modern Orthodoxy. She gave the analogy that “[Judaism is like] a
chess board, and for Modern Orthodoxy the chess board is in a glass case – you can’t touch it. But in Conservative\textsuperscript{12} [Judaism], you can move the pieces a little bit.” Sharon went on to say that Modern Orthodoxy differs from stricter versions of Orthodoxy in that “Modern Orthodox [people] try to integrate more into secular society.” Similarly, Lisa Steinberg, a teacher of religious studies at a Modern Orthodox high school in New York, said that, to her, Modern Orthodox means “a real adherence to \textit{Halacha}, a real respect for people who make different choices in their lives and an openness to the world and a willingness to engage with people who are different from myself.”

These three informants (and many others) all highlight certain aspects of Modern Orthodoxy that I have already spoken about. They are, in many ways, nicely summarizing the basic ideals of Modern Orthodoxy. However, it is important to understand that not all Modern Orthodox people fully abide by these standards. Rebecca Seegar is another Modern Orthodox student at Brandeis. When I asked her what Modern Orthodoxy means to her, she said a Modern Orthodox person is “someone who is involved, not necessarily follows all the \textit{Halachas} (Anglicized way of saying more than one \textit{Halacha}), but, like, is aware and tries to do the \textit{Halachot}. But at the same time is in the modern world, like goes out and gets an education, and works with all different types of people. Not someone who secludes themselves to only religious Jews.” Rebecca’s response still highlights the importance of both modernity and \textit{Halacha}, but she also addresses the fact that not all Modern Orthodox people are able to fully adhere to \textit{Halachot}. Just because a person’s life does not completely align with a \textit{Halachic} lifestyle does not mean that s/he cannot be considered Modern Orthodoxy.

\textsuperscript{12} Conservative Judaism is a branch of Judaism that also believes that \textit{Halacha} is important, but it tends to be more accepting of changing the \textit{Halacha} when necessary. For example, Conservative Judaism allows for people to drive on Shabbat when they would otherwise be unable to get to synagogue, whereas Modern Orthodoxy does not allow for this, as it goes against certain \textit{Halachot} in the \textit{Torah} and \textit{Gemara}.
Orthodox. Still, Rebecca did emphasize that trying to follow the Halachot is an important piece of Modern Orthodoxy, so to her, a person who is not making an attempt to lead a Halachic lifestyle would not necessarily be considered Modern Orthodox.

Based on this, an important question in Modern Orthodoxy is what exactly is considered to be Halachic. As I have already mentioned, Halacha comes from the Torah She-bichtav, and the Mishna and Gemara, but since the writing of these texts, many new inventions have come into being which require Halachic consideration. For example, with the invention of the light bulb, the question must be asked, is one allowed to turn on or off a light on Shabbat? There were no light bulbs in the time that these texts were written, so the rabbis had to make a decision about what to do. In the end, it was agreed upon by Modern Orthodox rabbis that turning on or off an incandescent light bulb is like lighting a fire, which is prohibited in the Torah She-bichtav, and thus is not allowed on Shabbat. Importantly, the rabbis’ decision was based on Halacha that was already in place, so while it may appear as though they are “changing” the Halacha in some way, they see themselves as simply incorporating new data into already existing Halachot.

While the question of the incandescent light bulb is very cut and dry, there are other cases that are less clear. One such example is tzniut, or modesty, which is often applied to what people (mostly women) wear. According to many Modern Orthodox people, to be dressed according to the laws of tzniut means to be dressed modestly, but what exactly that means to each individual person may differ. One prevailing idea of dressing according to tzniut is conveyed by Rebecca, who explained tzniut as “wearing skirts, and covering your elbows and collarbone.” Interestingly, immediately after saying this, Rebecca told me that she did follow this Halacha. While Rebecca did wear skirts and cover her arms, she did not
wear shirts that covered her collarbone, and therefore did not believe that she was fully adhering to the *Halacha*. On the other hand, there are other people who believe in a looser interpretation of what *tzniut* is. Rachel Beed, who also attends Brandeis University, said to me:

> I personally think I keep *tzniut*. Now, right now I am wearing leggings, so how am I keeping *tzniut*? I think there are varying degrees to which someone can keep *tzniut*. Now obviously that is not in a *Halachic* mindset, but like, nothing is exposed, I’m covered. I don’t feel uncomfortable walking out in public, I don’t feel like I am making a *Chillul Hashem*\(^\text{13}\) when I get dressed in the morning, and I feel comfortable with myself.

Rachel’s wardrobe at the time of our interview, as she herself points out, does not fit Rebecca’s idea of what it means to be wearing a *tzniut* outfit. However, Rachel feels as though she is adhering to the *Halachot* of *tzniut*, because she feels as though her outfit is appropriately modest. Within the Modern Orthodox world, there are people who would agree that Rachel’s outfit was *Halachically*\(^\text{14}\) okay, and others that would say that it was not. The differences of interpretations of some the less clear parts of certain *Halachot* are important to note, as they are an integral part of contemporary Modern Orthodoxy.

While people have varying views on certain details, it is important to note that they still abide by the same basic ideals – *Halacha* is important, as is interacting with the secular world. In addition to these aspects of Modern Orthodoxy, which I have already spoken at great length about, I received a number of other illuminating answers when I asked my

\(^\text{13}\) A *Chillul Hashem* is a desecration of God’s name, and it generally refers to when a person is doing something inappropriate. This can range from not adhering to the *Halacha* to saying a rude word.

\(^\text{14}\) Term meaning “according to *Halacha*.”
informants what Modern Orthodoxy meant to them, and I believe three of these are necessary to touch upon.

The first of these ideas is that Modern Orthodoxy can be defined as a sort of middle ground between two other sects of Judaism. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Modern Orthodoxy came about in the space left between Jews who wanted to fully integrate into secular society and Jews who wanted to entirely pull away from secular society. Those two groups, in addition to other sects of Judaism, still exist today. The different sects of Judaism are often thought to be on a spectrum, with those at the left being the least religious and most secular, and those on the right being the most religious and least secular. It is generally agreed upon that directly to the left of Modern Orthodoxy is Conservative Judaism, and directly to the right of Modern Orthodoxy is Ultra-Orthodox. Therefore, many people who consider themselves to be Modern Orthodox do so by defining what they are not. For example, when I asked Rachel what Modern Orthodoxy meant to her, she said:

What does Modern Orthodoxy mean to me? I guess I can define it by what the other two extremes are. [Ultra] Orthodox would be following every Halacha in terms of kashrut (dietary laws), Shabbat, prayer three times a day, whatever else that means. How much learning you have to do, how much charity you have to give, really following all 613 mitzvot and commandments. Conservative, from what I see of my friends, it’s a more lenient understanding of Torah, of mitzvot, I don’t know whether or not they add or take away mitzvot, but if they do,

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15 There are very few people, if any, who are considered to be just Orthodox. Orthodoxy is divided into people who choose to interact with the secular world – Modern Orthodox people – and people who choose to not do so – the Ultra-Orthodox. Some people do use Orthodox as an umbrella term for people who strictly follow all of the commandments

16 Mitzvot literally translates to commandments, and there are some differences between mitzvot and Halachot, but for the sake of simplicity, we will use them here interchangeably.
according to Orthodox standards, it’s not okay, because you’re not really supposed to alter or add to mitzvot.

Similarly, Adam Berkowitz, a Modern Orthodox man who also attends Brandeis University, said, “I put myself in the Modern Orthodox sphere by process of elimination in many sorts. I think I have been very to be raised in a comfortable American society that values working, that values business life and worldly pleasures, but also Judaism is the most important thing in my life, because it is my guiding principle.” For both Adam and Rachel, Modern Orthodoxy is defined in part by what it is not. It is not Conservative Judaism, which might be willing to alter Halachot, and it is not Ultra-Orthodox, which would not allow them to partake in secular activities. To them, and to others, Modern Orthodoxy can be thought of as a middle ground.

The second idea that came up often in my interviews is something that I touched upon earlier – the idea that Madda (worldly knowledge) is important in that it brings people closer to God. When talking about the secular world, Adam said, “The knowledge that we have and the opportunities that we have [in the secular world] are helpful to Judaism, they are not deterrents.” John Lecker, an English teacher at the same Modern Orthodox high school as Lisa, explained that Modern Orthodox Jews are “Invested in the idea that religious growth unfolds both in the context of religious studies and what we typically call general studies. It sort of happens everywhere.” Both Adam and John support the notion that secular (or general) studies are able to bring us towards a higher level of Judaism.

This is an important part of the ideal proposed by Modern Orthodoxy, and a vital piece of it is that Madda (worldly knowledge) and Torah (Jewish text and law) are supposed to work together. Adam summed it up by saying, “I think of them [modern world and
Judaism] as a whole.” The two are not separate – critically, they are two sides of the same coin. A Modern Orthodox Jew therefore should not feel as though they lead two separate lives – they lead one full, integrated life that incorporates both Torah and Madda.

One might expect, correctly so, that this sort of idea can lead to tension in some areas, particularly when secular ideas conflict with Halachot. This tension is the third idea that was brought up in my interviews when I asked what Modern Orthodoxy means. When I spoke to Rabbi Joel Smith, the principal of the aforementioned Modern Orthodox high school, about what Modern Orthodoxy means to him, we had the following conversation:

KB: Do you see the integration of modernity and Orthodoxy as an important aspect of Modern Orthodox Judaism?

Rabbi Smith: I think it’s a central facet of Modern Orthodoxy the way I see it and understand it, I also found it to be a very, very difficult way for people to live their Jewish lives.

The reason it is so difficult for people to lead Modern Orthodox lives in an integrated manner is due to the conflict that can and often does exist between what Halacha dictates and ideas in the secular world. Modern Orthodoxy is therefore a sect of Judaism that deals with a lot of conflicting ideologies. There are plenty of examples of this tension that exist within the United States today. For example, Leviticus 18:22 states that a man “shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind, it is abomination” (Mechon-Mamre). This is often interpreted as a prohibition against same-sex sexual relations, which can be seen as opposing the current secular trend towards accepting homosexual relations as legitimate.

The issue of women’s rights can lead to a similar tension between Halacha and current secular ideas on the subject, and it is this issue that I will focus on for the remainder
of my thesis. As I briefly mentioned in the introduction, and as I will continue to examine throughout this thesis, there are many aspects of Halacha that give men and women separate, unequal rights; that is, often women have fewer rights than men. At the same time, feminism is a widely embraced secular trend that advocates for equal rights and opportunities for men and women. How, then, are these two perspectives able to be reconciled within Modern Orthodoxy? According to some people, feminism can be taken in, and adapted to, Modern Orthodox guidelines. John explained to me that “Modern Orthodox communities would say, for instance, that feminist values that we borrow from the non-Jewish world, and are comfortable borrowing from the non-Jewish world…as we change in regard to those values, as we say, we are borrowing the value, changing our community to conform to that value, we are actually drawing closer to God.” John’s statement here falls in line with what he said earlier, that secular knowledge can bring us to a higher level of religion. This conforms to the ideal of having an integrated whole, where a person uses secular and religious knowledge in tandem to strive toward a single goal.

However, even if people are willing to bring aspects of feminism into Modern Orthodoxy, the tension between Halacha and secular ideals is, more often than not, still present, because, as I discuss in the following chapter, Modern Orthodox feminism and secular feminism tend to look very different, even within the same person. The tension still exists, because at the end of the day, when working within the confines of Modern Orthodoxy, one must abide (or at least attempt to abide) by Halacha, which creates a very different version of women’s rights from what exists in the secular world.
Are You a Feminist? Self Identification Regarding Women’s Rights

A Brief Background: Historical and Contemporary Feminism

Before I delve into how a person’s feminism can, and often does, differ based on the context they are in (i.e., in a religious versus secular context), it is important for me to explain what feminism generally looks like today in the United States. Feminism today has grown out of previous waves of feminism, each one characterized mainly by what the goal of the movement was. First wave feminism, which occurred primarily in the late 1800s, was aimed at giving women the right to vote, as well as rights to access forms of education, work, and health care (Swigonski & Raheim 2011:11). Building on that, second wave feminism, which began in the 1960s and continued through the 1970s, was predominated by what was known as “equality feminism.” As the name might suggest, equality feminism is a feminist ideology that supports the idea that women should have the same opportunities as men (Changfoot 2009: 12-13). Third wave feminism, which is the current wave of feminism in the United States, continues to support equal opportunity among men and women, but unlike second wave feminism, it explicitly looks to include the rights of minority women, such as women of color and lesbians. Swigonski writes, “At the heart of third-wave feminism’s
social action and theorizing is an explicit commitment to include women who had been excluded from the center of second-wave feminisms because of race, class, or sexual orientation” (2011: 18). Broken down to its very basics, feminism in the United States today is an ideology that supports equal opportunity for people, regardless of their gender. The notion of gender equality is prevalent (though, as I will suggest later, not always at the forefront of people’s minds) throughout the United States. A simple Google search will define feminism as “The advocacy of women’s rights on the grounds of political, social, and economic equality to men” (Oxford Dictionary17). One need not even go to Google to hear what feminism means. In Beyoncé’s song “Flawless,” the definition of feminist as “a person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes” is in the lyrics!

**Attitudes towards Feminism**

The idea that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities is so established in our contemporary society’s ideology that it is often taken for granted. In fact, of all of the people I interviewed, not one disagreed with the feminist notion that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. (However, as I will soon show, while every interviewee said they agree with this in a secular context, some did disagree in a religious context). When I asked Rachel Beed whether or not she believed in equal rights and opportunities for men and women, she said, “Women are entitled to the exact same things as men.” Similarly, when I asked Sharon Weiss if she believed in the feminist notion of gender equality, she said, “Yeah! I want to say like, of course I do, why wouldn’t I?” Interestingly, neither Rachel nor Sharon identified as feminists, and they were not alone. When I asked Rebecca Seegar the

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same question about gender equality, she said, “I wouldn’t think of myself as feminist, but I
do believe that women and men should be treated equally.”

Since all of these women believe in the idea that men and women should have equal
rights and opportunities, which is the basic tenet of feminism in the United States today, it
struck me that none of them identified as feminists. When I asked them why they do not
consider themselves to be feminists, all three women gave me a similar answer – they do not
fight for equal rights among the sexes. While the idea of actively fighting for women’s rights
is not fundamental to the contemporary definition of feminism, these women chose to not
self-identify as feminists because of that issue. I would argue that this exemplifies how
engrained the idea of equal rights is in our society. It is so obvious to these women that
people should have equal rights, regardless of their gender, that they do not feel as though
their beliefs merit a particular title. To them, it is only people who actively fight for equal
rights that would be identified as feminists, whereas believing in gender equality is just a part
of being a member of the secular society in the United States.

While Rachel, Sharon, and Rebecca all do not identify as feminists, many of the
people I interviewed who did believe in equal opportunity did define themselves as feminists.
When I asked Hannah Berger if she identified as a feminist, she said, “Yes. I believe in
equal opportunity. That I believe in absolutely. Men and women should be paid the same
for the same job, they should be given equal opportunity to get an education, to pursue a
career.” Other people, including Ora Giller, Lisa Steinberg, and John Lecker, all of whom
teach at the same Modern Orthodox high school, have seemingly simple answers to the
question, “Are you a feminist?” – they all said “yes.” John, Ora, and Lisa all believe in
equal rights and opportunities for men and women, and thus self-identify as feminists.
However, while there are some people who, regardless of how they self identify, agree that feminism means believing in (or fighting for) the equal rights and opportunities of men and women, there are other people who do identify as feminists who do not agree that men and women should always have equal rights and opportunities. When I asked Shira Barto if she identified as a feminist, she said, “Of course I am a feminist. Like, I don’t want the women to have to work in the kitchen, like that doesn’t make sense to me.” At first, Shira’s idea that women should not be confined to working in the home seems to fall in line with the idea that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men. However, when I asked Shira if she believed in the feminist notion of gender equality, she said,

Umm -- Within secular life, I definitely agree, I think that women should get equal pay, all that stuff. There is nothing a man can do that a woman can’t do in the workplace kind of thing. [But], within a religious context, my feminism is a little different, in that ‘equal’ is something that I struggle with a little bit but I’ve come to start to understand it.

Shira’s idea of what her feminism is is complicated in some ways by her religiosity. Shira is a Modern Orthodox woman, and as such she believes in the Halachot that I spoke about in chapter one. Many Halachot, some of which I will discuss in the coming chapters, separate the rights of men and women, and, at their core, treat men and women unequally. Therefore, while Shira sees herself as fully believing in women’s rights, she does not advocate for full equality in all aspects of her life--namely, her religious life.

While Shira’s divergent views of feminism in different contexts may strike some as odd, she is not alone in her beliefs. When I asked Adam Berkowitz, who also identifies as a feminist, if he believed in the feminist notion of gender equality, he said,

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18 Again, this is a standard contemporary definition of feminism in the United States.
In the secular world I 100% believe [in gender equality]. I think that it’s come to a point, women often times are more competent than men, there is no, absolutely no reason why anyone, for doing the same work especially, to get less money because of the way they were born, which was not what they chose. With regard to Judaism, I think that Judaism often gets a bad rap on their feminist rights, I think that people don’t really read in depth as much, or don’t do their research or discuss as much. I think that women are valued to the highest standard in Judaism. Now though they might not be able to Halachically do everything, [but] there are reasons behind it.

Here again, we see someone who, in the secular world, fully believes in equal rights for men and women, but in a religious context, believes that the Halachot must be observed, and therefore gender equality in terms of equal rights cannot be a priority, though he does express that both genders can and should be equally valued within Modern Orthodoxy.

A third example of a shift in what feminism means to a person based on whether they are talking about it in a religious versus secular context comes from Aviva Kutzner, another student at Brandeis University. During our interview, we had the following conversation:

KB Do you believe in the feminist notion of gender equality, not that women and men are the same, but that they deserve equal opportunity?

Aviva: Yeah, in a social standpoint, yes.

KB: As opposed to?

Aviva: I mean, like, I think there are different applications of feminism and what feminism looks like in a social setting and in a religious setting. I guess in a social setting, I think that women and men deserve equal rights in everything, no
question, and what that means by equal rights is that they have equal opportunities, so what men can do, women can do, and what women can do, men can do. In a religious setting, I think that in Judaism, women and men have different obligations, *Halachically*. Sometimes what women are obligated to do, men are not obligated to do, or obligated as much to do, so women have a higher obligation than men and a higher responsibility than men in that regard, and sometimes what men are obligated to do, women are not as obligated to do, and don’t have as much of a responsibility in that regard.

Aviva is using the same feminist perspective in Modern Orthodoxy that both Shira and Adam used – she is basing her opinions on the *Halacha* that exist in Modern Orthodoxy that require men and women to do different things. For Aviva, since men and women have different obligations and rights in Modern Orthodoxy, it is impossible for her to use her secular definition of feminism (i.e., equal opportunity) in a religious context. She therefore redefines her feminism to mean that men and women both have separate, but possibly equally important, obligations.

It is important to note that Shira, Adam, and Aviva do not believe that women should ever be fully subordinate, even within Judaism. They all believe in women’s rights, and therefore argue that women are respected in Judaism, even if they are not treated as equal to men. It is important to note that here, by “equal,” I mean granted the same rights and opportunities as men. Aviva, Adam, and Shira believe that women are treated differently than men, but this difference does not mean that they are treated “unequally.” While I was speaking to Adam about his feelings towards the role of women versus the role of men in Judaism, he said, “All these things that women can do including [raising kids], I don’t think
people realize how necessary and important and special women are in Jewish life.” To him, the role that women play in Judaism is different than the role men play, but this does not make the women’s role any less important. Similarly, when Shira was explaining to me how her feminism looks in a Jewish context, she said, 

I think that when I’m in a synagogue the role I’m playing and the role Joe Shmo is playing, we’re not given 100% of the same opportunities. But I think, I have a period and when I’m married, I’m going to go to the mikvah and have this whole other set of laws that men don’t have, and no one is saying they should get to have a period. My religious feminism acknowledges the fact that women are different in nature, their like bodies are different, and also the role they play in a family is often different.

To Shira, Adam, and Aviva, feminism in Judaism means that men and women can, and to some extent, should, hold different roles, but both genders can find fulfillment and respect in the roles they play. For them, a lot of the difference in roles comes from the Halacha, but for Shira, some of the difference also comes from the fact that men and women have different biologies – since their bodies are different, it is sometimes necessary for them to hold different roles. It is interesting to note that this thought process does not carry over into Shira’s secular feminist thought, even though men and women’s bodies also differ in the secular world. For Shira, Adam, and Aviva, their notions of feminism seem to be structured in part by the context in which they are thinking. In a secular mindset, they fully believe that

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19 I will speak about this more in a coming chapter, but in Modern Orthodoxy, men and women traditionally play very different roles in the synagogue, with men having many more leadership positions.  
20 Fake name 
21 A mikvah is a body of water, and Jewish law dictates that when a woman is married, she must go the mikvah every month seven days after her menstrual cycle is over.
men and women should have equal opportunity, whereas in a religious mindset, they believe men and women should have different roles (and different opportunities), but this should not lead to either group having more power.

Through the various answers people gave to the questions of “are you a feminist” and “do you believe in the feminist notion of equal opportunity,” it becomes clear that people’s notions of what feminism is can vary greatly. And, through Adam, Aviva, and Shira’s answers especially, we see that what feminism means to a single person can vary based on the circumstances. In order to create a fuller analysis of these various responses, I would like to point out two trends in answers; one about which people identified as feminists, and the other about how feminism shifts based on context.

Age Differences in Feminism

In terms of who among my interviewees did and did not identify as a feminist, I will be looking specifically at the labels people gave themselves, and (for the moment) disregarding their expressed beliefs about gender equality. Without fail, the older participants in my study fully identified as feminists, while the younger participants were much more hesitant to give themselves this title. Similarly, all of my older participants told me that they identified as Modern Orthodox feminists,22 as opposed to just being a Modern Orthodox person who is also a feminist, whereas only two of my younger participants identified as Modern Orthodox feminists.

22 The difference that my participants spoke about in terms of being a Modern Orthodox feminist versus being both Modern Orthodox and a feminist is that a Modern Orthodox feminist is someone whose feminism continues into the more religious aspects of their lives, whereas someone who separates the two identities does not strive for feminist ideals to be met in Modern Orthodoxy.
It is very likely that this difference stems from the generational differences between the two groups. More specifically, I believe that, at least in part, the difference in feelings towards the label feminist comes from the times in which these people grew up. Ora Giller, one of the older participants that I interviewed, explained to me how she came to be a feminist. She said, “I arrived at Barnard in September of 1969, so if you think about that, I read Betty Friedan. From very early on I would have identified myself as, I’m an Orthodox Jew, I’m a feminist. I didn’t think much about whether those things were contradictory or not. It was 1970…It [feminism] was in the air.” For Ora, part of her feminism came from her surroundings – she grew up during a time when feminism was very much on people’s minds, and this was at least part of the reason that she cared about it as well.

On the other hand, feminism today as a specific social-political movement is spoken about much less often in everyday culture than it was during second wave feminism. As I mentioned earlier, this is partially due to the fact that the idea of gender equality is in many ways taken for granted today,\(^23\) so people from this younger generation do not feel the need to identify themselves by their feminist beliefs. In his book *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, James Loewen writes, “Too young to have experienced or watched the civil rights movement as it happened, these young people have no understanding of he past and present workings of racism in American society” (2007: 171). A similar concept can be applied to feminism today – because young people have less of an understanding of second wave feminism and the issues that spurred it, they devote less of themselves to worrying about women’s (and men’s) rights in the United States today.

\(^{23}\) It is important to note that while the idea of gender equality is thought of as obvious to many people, it is very rarely achieved. Still today, men are paid more than women for doing the same work. There are many other examples of gender inequality, but the purpose of this section is not to talk about these inequalities. Rather, the purpose of this section is to highlight that many people feel that it is a given that men and women *should* have equal opportunities (at least in the secular world)
If you recall, in the previous chapter I wrote about how a large part of Modern Orthodoxy involves people being immersed in the secular culture that surrounds them. Part of Modern Orthodoxy also involves the idea that religious experiences and growth can happen in both religious and secular contexts, and that secular ideas can help foster religious growth. As I explained earlier, when I was speaking with John, he said, “Modern Orthodox communities would say, for instance, that feminist values that we borrow from the non-Jewish world, and are comfortable borrowing from the non-Jewish world...[through this] we are actually drawing closer to God.” For John, secular values are meant to help people grow in their religious lives. Given this aspect of Modern Orthodoxy, it makes sense that people who grew up during a time when feminism was a large part of secular culture would both identify with the term feminist, and allow their feminist values to seep into their religious lives.

What I have spoken about up until now in the previous paragraphs is, of course, rather broad. As with all research, there are exceptions to the norm, which I will go into here. As I mentioned earlier, there were a number of younger participants who did identify as feminists (though they made up less than half of the younger participants interviewed). However, unlike the older participants, who were willing to simply answer “yes” to the question “are you a feminist,” many (but again, not all) of my younger participants felt the need to qualify their statements. For example, when I spoke to Dina Gats, a young woman who is a very observant Conservative Jew, and follows all of the Halachot that Conservative Judaism requires a person to follow, about whether she considered herself to be a feminist, she said, “Yeah, but not in the sense that -- feminist is a big word, where people think of the

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24 Again, I am referring specifically to people who labeled themselves as feminists, not just people who believed in equal rights and opportunity
extremes, and I think that a feminist is someone who believes that all humans are equal.” Much like many of my other younger participants, Dina had learned through popular culture that feminism often means a person who has extreme tendencies when it comes to women’s rights (like a person who burns their bra or is a “man-hater”), and therefore felt the need to explain to me what feminism meant to her.

Still, even though Dina qualified what feminism meant to her, she did identify as a feminist, and she was not alone amongst people of her age group. Recall that both Shira and Adam considered themselves to be feminists, too, and all of my participants, even ones who did not label themselves as feminists, believed in gender equality, at least to some extent.

**Feminism in Different Contexts**

The second, and more important, trend I want to address from my participants’ answers is how people’s views of feminism changed based on context. I have already spoken at great length about Shira, Adam and Aviva’s thoughts on feminism in a secular context, where they believe in equal opportunity, versus a religious context, where they believe in differing roles for men and women. Unlike these three, however, many of the older participants that I interviewed who identified as Modern Orthodox feminists did not qualify to me that their views on feminism changed based on the context (i.e., religious vs. secular). Still, while the older people did not explicitly mention such changes, their feminism did manifest itself slightly differently in the Modern Orthodox world versus the secular world. For example, Lisa Steinberg, a woman in her mid-thirties who fully believes in equal rights for men and women in the secular world, still submits to the *Halacha* of Modern Orthodoxy, and therefore recognizes that there are certain aspects of gender equality that will never be
met in a religious context. In regards to her views on feminism and Modern Orthodoxy, she said,

Feminism is not the only value that I have, and I think that it’s important to recognize that, and I wouldn’t want feminism to be the only value that I have, and I am fully aware of the fact that I believe very strongly in Halacha and in the system of Halacha. That system comes along with some things that I don’t like, and I think it is a very worthwhile, you know.

Because of her strong devotion to Halacha, Lisa is willing to submit to a religious system that gives men and women different roles, even if this does not fully jive with her feminist attitudes. Similarly, when I asked John Lecker, who identifies as a Modern Orthodox feminist, if he felt that one “could fully integrate feminist notions into Modern Orthodoxy while still adhering to the Halacha,” he said, “Fully, no. I think they stand in tension.”

Both John, who is in his early forties and Lisa, who is in her thirties, know that their two belief systems are at some points at odds with each other, and therefore they do in some ways change their feminism from equal opportunity to something slightly different in a religious context.

Having said that, in many instances, older participants generally have a more optimistic view towards feminism within Modern Orthodoxy. As I will speak about in coming chapters, many of these older participants believe that Modern Orthodoxy will change in some (but critically not all) aspects, and women will gain more rights that men already have.
To some people, even if these changes do occur, feminism and Modern Orthodoxy will always remain at odds with each other. For example, when I was speaking to Dina Gats about her views of Modern Orthodoxy and feminism, we had the following conversation:

KB: Do you ever feel like feminist ideals are not met within Modern Orthodoxy?
Dina: Yeah, they’re 100% not met, that’s why I’m not Modern Orthodox. Women can’t read from the Torah, women aren’t allowed to sing by themselves, women aren’t allowed to do a lot of things slash aren’t required to do a lot of things.

KB: And do you think that there is a way for feminist ideals to be met within Modern Orthodoxy?
Dina: No, I think that if you join Modern Orthodoxy, slash [if you] agree with it, then you’re accepting those ideals or values.

For Dina, who is a student at Brandeis, feminism and Modern Orthodoxy are inherently at odds with each other, and if a person is Modern Orthodox, they are agreeing to the norms of a system that keeps women separate from, and in many ways subordinate to, men. In many ways, Dina is right – since the Halachot cannot change, there are certain aspects of Modern Orthodoxy that seem as though they will always be divided by gender. Still, there are other aspects that some people are looking to change as much as is Halachically permissible. Through the remainder of the thesis, I will be looking at how different people (feminists, people who believe in gender equality, and others) deal with the inequality among the sexes through various aspects of Modern Orthodox culture within the United States.
Women’s Role in Prayer: Competing Interpretations of Separation in the Synagogue

Laws of Prayer: A Brief Overview

For Modern Orthodox Jews, going to synagogue and participating in prayer is one of the mitzvot (commandments) that occurs most often in a person’s life. This chapter will examine various aspects of prayer with regards to the role that men and women play. While both men and women are allowed, and generally encouraged, to pray in Modern Orthodoxy, there are important gender distinctions and separations that can, but importantly do not necessarily, lead to feelings of frustrations among women. These gendered separations exist both in the physical realm, in terms of where men and women sit during prayer, and in a more abstract realm of personhood, in terms of what prayers women are allowed to lead, and whether or not they are counted when prayers require a certain number of people. This chapter will examine the nature of these gender distinctions, and the feelings that men and women – all of whom identify as believing in gender equality – have surrounding them. Are they interpreted as sexist? If not, what justifications do men and women give for the separation? If so, what are men and women trying to do to change these separations?
Overall, this chapter examines how people are experiencing, interpreting, supporting, and resisting the separations of gender that exists in the Modern Orthodox practices of prayer.

The laws surrounding prayer are rather convoluted, so for simplicity’s sake, I will only go into the ones most pertinent to my thesis. According to the Halacha (law), men are supposed to pray three times a day (Berachot 26b), and each of these prayers must take place during a certain time of day. There is one morning prayer, called Shacharit, an afternoon prayer, called Mincha, and an evening prayer, called Ma’ariv. On holy days, including most holidays and Shabbat, another prayer, called Mussaf, is added in between Shacharit and Mincha. On Mondays, Thursdays, Shabbat mornings, and certain holidays, a portion of the Torah is also read aloud during prayer services. The Gemara explains that it is preferable to pray with a minyan, or prayer quorum of ten adult men, in part because certain prayers, which are considered to be Devarim she-b’kiddusha, cannot be said unless in the presence of a minyan. The idea that a minyan must be ten adult men, and not ten people, comes from the tractate Megilla 23b, which uses a technique called a gezeira shava, in which the rabbis would find similar wording in various places in the Torah, and derive laws from this. In this case, there is a place in the Bible that discusses ten men as a congregation, and the rabbis connect this (through multiple gezeira shavas) to a place that the Torah mentions sanctification. The rabbis therefore conclude that one needs ten adult men (or a minyan) to say the Devarim she-b’kiddusha (holy words). This also means that prayers that are Devarim she-b’kiddusha can only be lead by men. I will discuss in more detail about Devarim she-b’kiddusha later on in this chapter, but for now, it is important to understand that traditionally

25 Shabbat is considered to be a holy day in Judaism that goes from Friday evening through Saturday evening.
26 A text containing many Halachot and rabbinic debates. This part of the gemara involves rabbis explaining which prayers must have a prayer quorum of ten, and where this rule is derived from.
27 Roughly translated, this means “words that are holy.”
the reading of the Torah, and certain parts of *Shacharit, Mincha*, and *Ma’ariv*, are considered to be *Devarim she-b’kiddusha*—leadable only be men.

The last, and perhaps most critical aspect of prayer as it pertains to this thesis, is that women are not required to pray, as prayer is considered a “positive time-bound mitzvah” (Kiddushin 29a). By “positive time bound mitzvah,” I mean a mitzvah [commandment] that requires someone to do something (as opposed to avoid doing something) and must be done during a certain time period. The reason people generally give for women not being required to fulfill positive time bound *mitzvot* (called *mitzvah asei shehazman grama* in Hebrew) is that women were traditionally expected to stay home with their children, so it would have been difficult for them to complete the *mitzvot* on time. Importantly, even though women are not required to pray, they are certainly allowed to pray. Still, while women are allowed to pray, there are different interpretations of what exactly they are allowed to say, and in what contexts. Traditionally, it is agreed upon within Modern Orthodoxy that men, and not women, should lead the service.

This chapter examines various ways in which men and women choose to interpret the separation that exists within prayer services in Modern Orthodoxy. Through the lens of French sociologist and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu, I will address the ways in which certain rituals have become so engrained that they are thought to be natural, and how this is reflected in people’s willingness to accept these potentially sexist practices. I will also examine the ways in which some people have started to react against these practices, and the steps they have taken in order to give women more of a role within Modern Orthodox prayer. Ultimately, I argue that the competing feelings of women’s role in prayer highlight differences of opinion with regards to what men and women want from prayer services.
Some people, who do not want change, seem to enjoy that their gender differentiated prayer services are comfortable, and what they are used to. Others, who advocate for increased women’s rights within prayer, hope to see this change lead to an increased appreciation for women’s role in Modern Orthodoxy as a whole. Before I turn to these topics, however, I would like to spend some time examining the physical setup of Modern Orthodox synagogues, as I believe this also highlights people’s views women’s role in prayer.

**Separate Seating: Attitudes Concerning Physical Separation During Prayer**

In Modern Orthodoxy today, when men and women go to pray, they sit in the prayer sanctuary within a synagogue, which almost always has a *mechitza*, or a partition that is meant to separate men and women. This section is devoted to looking at various ways in which the *mechitza* can be erected, and the potential implications differences might have in terms of gender (in)equality. It should also be noted that Conservative synagogues, which promote more egalitarian prayer services, do not generally have *mechitzot* (plural of *mechitza*). Therefore, the *mechitza* is one of the main differences between Conservative and Modern Orthodox prayer services. As Sharon Weiss, who grew up Conservative, but now goes to Modern Orthodox services, said to me, “The main difference between Conservative Judaism and Modern Orthodoxy is…the *mechitza*, like the mechitzah is obviously like a huge, huge thing, and the egalitarianism in general [is huge].” While *mechitzot* exist in almost all (if not all) Modern Orthodox synagogues, the types of *mechitzot* vary greatly from place to place. One of my informants, Hannah Berger, belongs to a synagogue in Teaneck that has a *mechitza* that has men’s seating on the right and women’s seating on the left. She explained, “The *mechitza* runs down the middle. So you walk into the back of the
synagogue, and the men’s section sit on the right and the women’s section is on the left, and the *mechitza* is, not quite down the middle, it actually does a zigzag, so I think there are probably more seats on the men’s side.” Similarl

uy, at the Modern Orthodox service that I attended at Brandeis, women sat on the left, and men sat on the right, and there were around the same number of seats on both sides of the *mechitza*. This side-by-side setup is common in many Modern Orthodox synagogues, but even within the synagogues that offer side-by-side layout, the type of *mechitza* can vary. Some of these synagogues, including the one at Brandeis, have opaque curtain-like *mechitzot*, which are high enough that a person cannot see what is happening on the other side of the *mechitza* when s/he is sitting down, but can see more when s/he stands up. Torah B’Emtza, another synagogue in Teaneck which also offers side-by-side men and women’s sections, has a *mechitza* that is approximately four and a half feet tall, the bottom 3 feet of which are wood, and the top foot and a half are glass.

*A view of the mechitza from the women’s section in the main sanctuary in Torah B’Emtza. The mechitza is the wooden and glass structure, visible starting from the bottom left corner, and continuing through the center of the picture.*
Another setup for separate seating that is traditionally found in Modern Orthodox synagogues is having men in the middle of the sanctuary, and women on either side. Shira Barto described her synagogue in this way. She said,

My synagogue at home is also Modern Orthodox….So it’s separate seating men and women, with the women being on the two sides and the men being in the middle. And the *mechitza* is half wood to the waist, and then glass above that, so you get a pretty clear view of the men, and then there is a *bima*\(^{28}\) towards the front and then there is a stage on top.

The *mechitza* Sharon describes is similar to the one I saw in Torah B’Emtza (pictured above), and she mentions that women have a relatively clear view of what is happening on the men’s side. The reason women need a clear view of what is happening on the men’s side of the *mechitza* is that the men’s section is where all of the leading of the prayer takes place. As I mentioned earlier, it is traditionally men who lead all parts of the prayer service, which is why the *bima*, or raised prayer platform, that Sharon mentioned is on the men’s side – there would be no use for one on the women’s side, because women do not participate in leading prayers.

Unlike the previous synagogues that I mentioned, which put men and women side by side in relatively equal fashion, Sharon’s synagogue physically puts men in the center of prayer, while keeping women off to the side. And Sharon’s synagogue is not alone. In the smaller prayer sanctuary in Torah B’Emtza, the men’s section is in the middle, there are women’s sections on either side, and there is far more space in the men’s section than the women’s sections.

\(^{28}\) A *bima* is where the leading of services generally occurs. It generally is a raised platform, and is traditionally in the men’s section of the prayer sanctuary.
There are other synagogues which create even more of a separation between men and women in prayer. Adam Berkowitz, who goes to a synagogue in New York City, described his Modern Orthodox synagogue as follows:

The main synagogue is auditorium-esque, it’s a 100+ year old structure, with a woman’s balcony, they did for a while, on Friday nights in the summer, when Friday nights wasn’t as populated, they put a mechitza, and then had men on one side, women on the other side. There was a fire in the [synagogue], a couple summers ago, so they’re reconstructing it, the same set up, but with more room on the women’s balcony.

Here again, women are even further removed from the men, who are doing all of the leading of prayers. One could argue that the reason that the women’s section is in a balcony is because the synagogue itself is so old, and the customs of Modern Orthodoxy were more conservative a hundred years ago. But there are other examples of synagogues that literally push women to the back of the prayer service that were constructed much more recently. John Lecker was telling me about a Modern Orthodox synagogue that he lives near, but purposely chooses not to attend. He explained that they recently “redid their entire sanctuary, and yet built the mechitza so that the women were sitting in the back behind the men.” Here again we see a mechitza that is purposefully constructed in such a way that women are far removed from the leading of prayer services.

**Feelings on Separation: Differing Ideas on Mechitzot**

One might think that this type of separation would lead to women feeling annoyed with mechitzot (plural of mechitza), and some do. However, there are many people who are
either satisfied with or even enjoy the separation that a mechitza offers, for a variety of reasons. In this section I will explore the different attitudes people have toward mechitzhot.

Sharon, who used to be more on the Conservative side of the Jewish spectrum, and now affiliates more with Modern Orthodoxy (though still does not call herself Modern Orthodox), has had different opinions on the mechitza throughout her life. She explained to me:

I used to think mechitas\textsuperscript{29} are stupid, they’re annoying, they’re degrading…and I think the context under which I had seen mechitzas, with the exception of a few, were degrading, especially in Israel. In Israel, there are some mechitzas that are straight up just cages for women, and that’s like, very degrading….And now I’ve grown to have an appreciation for mechitzas as like something that separates men from women so they can both better focus on their prayer, but I don’t accept the notion that mechitzas are to take the women away from the men so the men can focus on their prayer, like yes I understand they are halachikally [lawfully] obligated, women aren’t, but if a woman is choosing to pray, she should be given the same amount of respect and opportunity to focus as the man.

Sharon’s statement holds within it two key ideas that I would like to highlight – the first is that the type of mechitza (i.e., is it wooden and glass, so that women can see, or is it more cage-like) can vary greatly, and, based on the type of mechitza, people’s opinions about mechitzot can vary as well. The second idea that Sharon brings up is one of the possible explanations for why mechitzot are necessary – they take women away from men so that men can focus. Sharon mentions that she does not like this sort of reasoning for mechitzot, as it feels degrading to women, and she is not alone. None of the people I interviewed accepted

\textsuperscript{29} Mechitzas is an Anglicized way of saying “the plural of mechitza.”
this idea as a valid reasoning for having a *mechitza*. This is arguably the reason that people like John were unhappy with having *mechitzot* that put women physically behind men (which take women out of sight for the men, so the men can concentrate).

However, many of my participants were happy to have *mechitzot* when they prayed, and their answers highlighted two main reasons for people appreciating *mechitzot*. The first of these reasons is that many of my participants grew up in a community where synagogues had *mechitzot*, and thus they felt used to, and comfortable with, *mechitzot*. Hannah Berger attributed part of her enjoyment of having a *mechitza* to “comfort level,” and this feeling was echoed by many of the people I interviewed. Rebecca, who grew up going to Modern Orthodox synagogues, told me that she preferred going to Modern Orthodox services because, “because I like the *davening* [praying]….I think it’s because I’m used to that type of *davening,*” and when I asked her what she meant by that type of *davening*, she said that she preferred it because she enjoyed that there was a *mechitza* and that men were leading the service. I will address Rebecca’s comment about men leading the prayer service more in the coming section, but what is important here is that Rebecca enjoys having a *mechitza*, because, much like Hannah, she is comfortable with it. The idea that people enjoy what they are used is therefore a key aspect of why people who consider themselves to be feminist go along with practices that could be interpreted as going against women’s rights.

The second reasoning for enjoying *mechitzot* that people gave is that they were able to interpret *mechitzot* in such a way that was not degrading to women. Sharon, who now enjoys praying with a *mechitza*, gave one such reason. Instead of the *mechitza* being used to take women away from men so men could pray, she believed that the *mechitza* could be used to isolate both sexes, so each could concentrate equally on their prayer. This still points to
the idea that a *mechitza* is meant to separate people, because if there was mixed seating, people would be focused more on people of the opposite sex than their prayers, but it does give equal weight to men and women.

There are other people, however, who do not like the idea that a *mechitza* is meant to separate people in order to keep their focus off of people of the opposite sex. Hannah Berger, who is the head of a large organization that supports women’s rights within Modern Orthodoxy, said to me, “That’s not what strikes me as…you need a *mechitza* otherwise you’ll have uncontrollable sexual urges, like, I don’t know, it doesn’t resonate for me.” Instead of the *mechitza* being a way to keep people away from their urges, Hannah uses a completely different understanding of what the purpose of the *mechitza* is when she explains her rationale for enjoying the separation:

I prefer *davening* [praying] with a *mechitza*…. I think I like the aloneness during prayer, which I think is easier when you’re disconnected from your family unit, which is the natural way to sit when you’re in a non-*mechitza* environment. When I *daven*, when I’m at an Orthodox synagogue, I’ll try to pick a seat that is far away from everybody…. Even though I’m part of a community, not necessarily being connected to the individuals, but being part of the mass, and a *mechitza* I think is useful for that, not necessarily because it does it to me, but because it does it to everyone else…. In synagogue if everyone is sitting in their little family unit, then I think it’s less conducive to community because it means if you’re not part of a normal family unit, that you’re not normal.

Hannah’s views the *mechitza*, a structure that physically divides people, as something that actually brings people into a more communal setting, by not isolating any one person who
may not belong to the typical family unit. By doing this, she is taking what could be construed as potentially sexist and reinterpreting it in a way that has nothing to do with gender at all. I believe this is an important way in which feminists can continue to support aspects of Modern Orthodoxy that might seem to detract from women’s rights. Through reinterpretation of certain practices, people can undo sexist attitudes that come along with the traditional reasoning behind those practices.

Of course, while Hannah’s view of mechitzot is plausible, the type of mechitza that exists within a synagogue might impact whether or not her interpretation holds credence within that synagogue. What I mean by this is it is far more imaginable that the mechitza is not a tool used to keep women away from men when the mechitza does not keep women behind (or on another level than) men, and instead has them side by side, with equal spacing given to both men and women. This brings me to another, far newer type of mechitza that exists in some synagogues, including the one Hannah Berger attends. John Lecker, who also attends this synagogue, describes the prayer sanctuary as “A Modern Orthodox [one, with a] mechitza down the middle, with an Ahron in the front. Equal sides and spacing. The bima is on the men’s side, but there is a door that opens to the women’s side.” In this synagogue, the men’s section and women’s section are side by side, they receive equal spacing, and perhaps most importantly, the bima, where prayer leading occurs, can be accessed from either side. According to John, men still lead all of the services, but “women are free to give divrei Torah from the pulpit when they speak, they can do so during davening [praying]. In some shuls [synagogues], they bump them until after the services.”

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30 The Ahron, or Ahron Kodesh, literally translated as the Holy Ark, is the place in a synagogue where the Torah scrolls are kept when they are not being read from.
31 The raised platform where the leading of services generally occurs
32 Literally “words of Torah,” this is a speech that generally has to do with the section of Torah that is being read that week.
With a *mechitza* that splits the sanctuary evenly, and allows both men and women access to the area where the leading of prayer and announcements occur, it becomes much easier to imagine an equality among men and women, even with a divider between them.

*Separate but Equal? Differences in Roles of Men and Women in Prayer*

Now that I have spoken about the physical aspects of prayer space, I am going to shift my focus to the actual roles men and women play in prayer, and I will continue to tie in physical separation as I go. Recall that, at the beginning of this chapter, I explained that women are not obligated to pray, though they are not prohibited from praying. It is also important to remember that certain prayers, called *Devarim she-b’kiddusha*, or words that are holy, can only be said when a *minyan*, or prayer quorum of ten adult men, is present. Critically, this does not mean that women (or men) cannot pray when a *minyan* is not present – it just means that these specific prayers cannot be said during the prayer.

Knowing this, I would like to look briefly at how prayer works in seminaries and yeshivas in Israel. Right after high school, many Modern Orthodox men and women take a gap year and go to Israel, and they spend the year studying in a Jewish institution – girls study in seminaries, and boys study in yeshivas (there are no Modern Orthodox co-ed gap year programs). All of the women whom I interviewed who went to seminary explained to me that their seminaries did not require them to go to services. Shira Barto and I had the following conversation about her Israel seminary:

KB: In seminary were there services?

Shira: No, there weren’t like official services, well there were for holidays…but there weren’t daily services.
KB: Do you know why?

Shira: Well, I think that since there weren’t ten men, and we wouldn’t be reading Torah anyway, they didn’t feel a need to do a formal service for everybody.

On the other hand, not one of the men who I spoke to went to a yeshiva that did not require services. The fact that men are all required to go to services, while women are not, in part has to do with the fact that women are not halachikally [lawfully] required to pray, but there were many other requirements in seminary that were not halachikally required, so why not praying? What I mean is, the seminaries that these girls attended could have chosen to make praying a mandatory part of the daily ritual, especially since girls are allowed to pray if they want to, so why did they not? I believe this in part has to do with the fact that praying is not expected to be a part of women’s connection to Judaism in the same way it is for men. There are higher expectations for men in terms of prayer, which can, as I will show later in this chapter, lead to some women feeling less connected to prayer. Additionally, because women are not halachikally allowed to lead certain parts of prayer services, men have traditionally been the ones to lead the whole service.

Much like with mechitzot (the dividers between men and women), the amount of female participation can vary greatly from synagogue to synagogue, even within the Modern Orthodox community. Maya Stein described the role of women in her synagogue on Simchat Torah, a holiday when people celebrate the completion of reading the Torah. Traditionally, people celebrate by dancing with and holding the Torah, and Maya explained to me that, “on Simchat Torah the women can hold the Torah and the men can hold the Torah, [I know] there is nothing [halachikally] wrong with the women holding the Torah, [but] in my shul [synagogue] the women aren’t allowed to hold the Torah.” In Maya’s synagogue, they go
beyond what the *Halacha* (Jewish law) says is prohibited for women by not allowing them to
hold the Torah scrolls. There are many other examples of women participating very little in
Modern Orthodox synagogues. Hannah Berger, for example, who I spoke about earlier,
belongs to two synagogues, the first of which I have already mentioned as having a *mechitza*
that evenly divides men and women, and the second of which is, according to Hannah:

A very standard, I would say Orthodox synagogue, and does not include any of
those things [that give women a more participatory role]…. In terms of women’s
participation, um, so they don’t bring the *torah* through the women’s section, they
don’t have women speak from the pulpit. They will have women speak after
services are over, you know, from the lectern, but not during services. They don’t
have a woman’s *tefillah*\(^\text{33}\)…Until recently they had in the bi-laws that a woman
couldn’t be president, they did change that, but it hasn’t happened yet, that a
woman become president, but they did change the bi-laws so that it could happen.

In this synagogue, women again lack any major participatory role when it comes to prayer
services. Hannah even mentions that it was, until recently, impossible for a woman to be
president, which has nothing to do with *Halacha* – it just has to do with not granting women
rights.

Many of the women whom I spoke with did feel as though women have no role in
prayer services, and articulated this to me. Sharon Weiss explained to me how the Modern
Orthodox services at her synagogue work. She said, “[The leading of services] happened on
the men’s side, exclusively. So that’s also a thing…The Orthodox minyan, the women

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\(^{33}\) A woman’s *tefillah* is a woman’s prayer group, where women are able to get together and pray as a
group with no men present. Since no men are present, they are not able to say certain prayers, but the
prayers they can say they are able to lead. I will address this later in this chapter.
basically didn’t participate whatsoever…. Basically, service wise, in the Orthodox community on campus, and in general, women have no role.”

While the synagogue that Sharon is talking about offers no role to women, there are Modern Orthodox services that do give women slightly more of a participatory role in services. The synagogue attended by John and Hannah is one such example. Lisa Steinberg, who also attends this synagogue, explained it to me:

It is probably as participatory as women can get without being…without having like an actual role in the service, but women, don’t lein [read from the torah], women don’t really lead parts of the service. The Torah is taken to them women’s side, a woman carries it through the women’s side. Women recite the mi sheberach for tzahal.34 Women speak all the time in shul [synagogue], but it isn’t a…they are not leading the service really.

In this synagogue, women are given more of a role than in the other synagogues I have written about, but still, Lisa highlights that women do not have “an actual role in the service.”

These examples of women’s non-participation in synagogue can of course lead to feelings of isolation, but interestingly (or perhaps this is to be expected), many, but critically not all, women are satisfied with these practices. Much like with the mechitzot, women give a variety of reasons for why they are okay with their lack of participation in the service. Rachel Beed, for example, does not mind that men lead the prayer service, because, she feels that, “In shul [synagogue], women are still given the abilities to partake in the I guess tefillah [prayer] aspect of it.” Rachel’s feelings surrounding prayer are that, while she may not be

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34 The mi sheberach is not a traditional prayer, but it is a request for God to bless the soldiers of the Israeli army (tzahal) and ask for their safe return. Because it is not a “real” prayer, it is generally accepted in more liberal Modern Orthodox synagogues that women can say it.
able to lead the prayer service, she knows that she is allowed to say the prayers to herself, and if it is a prayer that everyone is saying aloud, she can say it out loud along with them. She therefore feels.

Rachel also brought up the fact that she wants to feel comfortable when she prays, and since she is used to men leading, she prefers services where men lead. She explained,

I would go to a women’s and male partnership minyan,35 I don’t have an issue with that, though I do sit there and I feel a little, I don’t feel uncomfortable with the ideology of it but me being there, sitting there, it feels foreign to me and I don’t connect to it, so I don’t enjoy it…It’s just the way I was raised. Like it’s a cultural thing.

Rachel told me that, at her high school, girls would say the mi sheberach for tzahal, but boys would lead all other parts of the service. All of the participants whom I spoke to that went to Modern Orthodox high schools experienced the same thing. The way the schools run prayer services are very similar to the way traditional Modern Orthodox services are run – with the boys leading the majority of the service. As Rachel pointed out, this leads her to feeling more comfortable with men leading the service, which is similar to Rebecca Seegar’s account of preferring to pray with a mechitza and with men leading the service, which I wrote about in the previous section. I believe that comfort level is one of the reasons that many of my participants choose to not advocate for increased women’s rights in prayer.

Other women who are also comfortable with their lack of participation in certain aspects of prayer claim that they are okay with their non-role because, while men have more

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35 A partnership minyan, which I will go into greater detail on later, is a prayer group that gives as many rights to women as is Halachically permissible. This means that women have much more of a leadership role than in a traditional service.
of a role in prayer, women have more of a role in other aspects of Jewish life. Shira Barto who held this sentiment, said to me,

I think that when I’m in a synagogue the role I’m playing and the role Joe Shmo is playing, we’re not given 100% of the same opportunities, but I think, I have a period and when I’m married, I’m gonna go to the mikvah\(^{36}\) and have this whole other set of laws that men don’t have, and no one is saying they should get to have a period.

Here Shira is making the claim that, while she does not have as much of a role in the synagogue, she gets to participate in certain rituals that men do not participate in, so why should she complain? If you will recall, in the last chapter I mentioned that some of the women I interviewed felt that feminism within Modern Orthodoxy meant that men and women should be separate but equal – that is, they should have different roles, but be given equal respect for their roles. Shira’s claim that men and women can have different roles, which is why she is fine with not leading services, is based on this separate but equal claim.

Many of the women whom I spoke to held this type of belief – they understood that there were many aspects of Jewish rituals that they could not partake in, but they felt as though they had other rituals that they could perform, so they did not feel mistreated in any way. Interestingly, most of the women who held this sort of belief used the mikvah as their example of something women could do that men did not do. However, men are actually required to go to the mikvah as well\(^{37}\) (though of course they do not go after menstruating).

Still, many people who use this “separate but equal” logic do think of going to the mikvah as a woman’s special mitzvah, or commandment.

\(^{36}\) The mikvah is a ritual body of water in which women dip themselves some time after they have finished menstruating in order to ritually cleanse themselves.

\(^{37}\) Men traditionally go before Yom Kippur, in order to ritually cleanse themselves.
Voicing Frustrations: Responses of People Who Want More Equality in Prayer

While there are many women who feel comfortable with their role (or lack thereof) in prayer, there are also plenty of people – both women and men – who feel annoyed by the lack of women’s participation in services. Some people feel as though the lack of participation leads women to caring less about the prayer services themselves. Sharon Weiss, for example, spoke about the attitudes of women who went to the Modern Orthodox service versus the attitudes of the women who attended the Conservative service offered at her high school. She said,

Also, I think it’s the attitudes, because I think a lot of the girls that went to the Orthodox services, obviously there were some that did pray, but a lot of them were like, oh yeah, we can just sit and talk on our side. And I think that was like…. I think it was just an attitude, like the girls in our [Conservative service], some [of them] did take the minyan as a joke…but I think there were more girls that took it as less of a joke than the Orthodox minyan.

Sharon’s recounting of the two services exemplifies the idea that women who were expected to participate in the service (in the Conservative minyan) were more likely to take the prayer service more seriously, whereas women in the Modern Orthodox service, who were not given any sort of obligation, took the service as more of a joke in some ways.

John Lecker voiced a similar opinion to that of Sharon. He feels as though women would start feeling more accountable in prayer if their synagogue held them more accountable. He offered up to me the following scenario:

38 Remember that, in Conservative services, women have full participatory rights, as Conservative Judaism aims for fully egalitarian service.
In fact in almost any *shul* [synagogue] you go to, on almost any Shabbat morning, the women show up at 10:30 to eleven, and the men show up at nine. You could, for example, the *shul* could have a policy that *davening* [praying] won’t start until there is a minyan of men and a minyan of women. And, yes, for ten months, *davening* would start at ten o’clock, and eventually you’d start getting a minyan of women that show up also, and you would have more women coming to services.

What John has noticed is that, since women are not counted for the *minyan*, no one is depending on them to come to prayer services, and therefore they do not make any effort to show up on time. However, if a synagogue were to wait to start prayer services until ten men and ten women showed up, women would start feeling more of an obligation, which would possibly lead them to feeling like they were more involved in the prayer service.

*The point of view of a woman sitting down in the women’s section, looking towards the men’s section through the mechitza.*

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Lisa Steinberg also voiced her frustrations about her lack of role in prayer services. When I asked her if she ever felt disconnected from the service, she responded, “Totally, a hundred percent, a hundred percent. I often find myself in a room where there are eight or nine men and they are waiting for a minyan. I can’t stand that, and I am fully aware that that is not gender equality.” Lisa’s frustration stems from the fact that she does not count in the same way a man does when it comes to prayer. The fact that women do not count towards a minyan is very frustrating to many people, because it points to a lack of women’s personhood in some respects.39 There are other instances in which a prayer service does not give women the same rights that it grants men, which can make women feel inferior. Nancy Bloom, an older woman who used to consider herself Modern Orthodox, but no longer does in part because she got fed up with women’s rights in Orthodoxy, told me about the time she had to say kaddish,40 a mourner’s prayer, for her son. She said:

My shul [synagogue] used to let women say kaddish on their own [without a man saying it along with them] but they no longer do so. If no man has an obligation to say kaddish, but a woman does, they still have the man say it along with her. I don’t like that at all -- I find it offensive. On the other hand, women saying kaddish are welcomed, and not ignored. Their amens are responded to. [But]

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39 The reason that only ten men count in a minyan is that, in the Bible, there is a reference to ten male spies who go into Israel as an “eida,” or “congregation,” (Numbers 14:27) and there is another place in the bible that uses the same word “eida” with the word “toch,” or “midst” (Numbers 16:21), and there is another place that uses the word “toch” in the same place it uses the word “kadesh,” or “holy” (Leviticus 22:32). From this the rabbis interpret that a minyan, which is necessary to say something holy, must be ten men because of the ten male spies, even though the actual wording in the mishna says that ten people are required – it does not specify gender. It simply says “p’toch me-asarah,” (Megilla 23b) meaning “with less than ten,” there is no minyan.

40 A mourner’s prayer that is said by a relative of the deceased during the year following the person’s death. Critically, both men and women are thought of as mourners (so a mother and a father will both mourn the death of a child).
women are not full people when it comes to Orthodox prayer services, or religious leadership.

During this conversation, the pain that Nancy felt when she was trying to grieve for her son was visible on her face. It was also evident that she was angry at her synagogue, because she felt as though they were diminishing her personhood while she was trying to mourn over her recently deceased son. While Nancy was trying to say a prayer because she had an obligation to, her synagogue would not let her say it without a man, even though he had no obligation, having no recently deceased relative. Again, this speaks to the lack of personhood held by women during Modern Orthodox prayer services, which many women do feel frustrated by. Because of this, women (and men) have over the past thirty to forty years, started coming up with ways to give women more rights in prayer.

One of the earlier ways women started participating more in prayer came in the form of what is now known as a “women’s tefillah,” or women’s prayer group. One of my participants Ora Giller, who considers herself to be an avid feminist, in part because she grew up in the 1970s, when feminism was in the air, takes credit for helping to start one of the first women’s tefillah groups. She explained to me that, “Two of my friends and I were the people who really organized the first leining [reading from the torah]…for women. And then there were a lot of discussions about what bracha⁴¹ to say, how the aliya⁴² would go.” Soon after that, they transitioned from having only leining (Torah reading) for women to having a full prayer service. She said, “we moved to a full davening ourselves without the kaddish

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⁴¹ Bracha means blessing. When a person reads from the Torah, they are expected to say a blessing beforehand and afterward.
⁴² To get an aliya is to get called up to the bima for a part of the Torah reading, and is generally accepted to be an honor.
and *kedusha*, and then we started meeting up about every six weeks.” According to Ora, when she and her friends started the women’s *tefillah* group, there was a lot of backlash from members of their synagogue who were very against the idea of women having their own prayer group. In this group, women were able to lead the prayers that men normally say, because there were no men present, and, as I have previously stated, there is no *Halacha* against women praying. Still, as Ora mentioned, these women were not able to complete a full prayer service – they had to leave out certain prayers that are considered to be *Devarim she-b’kiddusha*, which required a *minyan* of ten men. Other things that are traditionally considered to be *Devarim she-b’kiddusha*, however, they were able to say by finding loopholes within the *Halacha*. So, for example, these women were able to read Torah by making the claim that they were learning Torah, and not simply reading it, and therefore it is not part of *Devarim she-b’kiddusha*.

While women’s *tefillah* groups received a lot of criticism when they first began in the 1970s, they have since become much more accepted, particularly in Modern Orthodoxy. Many of the women whom I interviewed, including Sharon, had high schools that offered a women’s *tefillah* group once a month or so. Sharon said to me “Once a month they [the Orthodox minyan] had women’s services…it would be like all women in the room, so women would lead and would read Torah, and it was great.” One of the reasons women’s *tefillah* groups have become so accepted, even among less liberal Modern Orthodox people, is because the women are not saying the prayers in front of men, so there is no one there that has more of a *Halachic* (lawful) obligation to say the prayers.

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*43 Kaddish and Kedusha are considered to be *Devarim she-b’kiddusha*, meaning that they could not be said without a *minyan* of ten men present.*
Similar to women’s tefillah groups, many synagogues and schools will have women’s megilla readings on Purim, a Jewish holiday celebrating the Jews overcoming a plot to destroy them. The megilla is the scroll that the story is read from, generally in front of a congregation. Maya Stein explained to me that women’s megilla readings are acceptable, because, “Men aren’t present…. Women can do some things, like it’s different because women can’t do it in front of men, but I think if you want to read the megillah, you’re reading it because you actually want to, and you don’t really care that much who your audience is.” For Maya, women’s megilla readings are permissible because women are doing it solely in front of women, and not in front of men. Many people feel similarly about women’s tefillah groups – they are okay because men are not present.

However, even more recently, a new type of minyan has started to emerge that gives women and men an (almost) equal platform to lead prayer services in the same place. These services are called “partnership minyanim,”44 and, as Lisa Steinberg describes it, “It is more participatory, it is not fully egalitarian, but it is more participatory [than a traditional Modern Orthodox service], and there are more roles that both men and women can take, so both men and women read from the Torah. Um, there are certain parts of the tefillah [prayer] that women lead as well, in addition to men.” More specifically, Lisa explained that “women lead pesukei dezimrah45 and the hotza’ah and hachnassa of the sefer Torah,46 and they do leining [reading from the torah]. So they don’t do Shacharit [morning prayer] and Mussaf [afternoon prayer].” When I asked why women do not lead Shacharit or Mussaf, Lisa said that they were Devarim she-b’kiddusha [prayer requiring a minyan of ten men], and therefore

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44 Minyanim is the plural form of minyan
45 A group of prayers recited during services
46 Hotza’ah of the Torah is the precession of taking the Torah out of the Ark, and Hachnassa is the precession of putting the Torah back in the Ark.
it is very difficult, if not impossible, to say it is okay for women to lead them according to
*Halacha* [Jewish law].

What is special about a partnership *minyan* is that, while men are technically able to lead all parts of the service, the parts that women are allowed to lead, they do, which allows them to have a more participatory role. Women are able to go up to the *bima*, which is the platform from which most of the prayer services are lead. There is still a *mechitza* separating men and women in partnership *minaynim*, but there is an entrance from both the men’s and women’s side to the *bima*, or, in some partnership *minyanim*, they will have a *bima* on the men’s side and a *bima* on the women’s side.

Partnership services are very appealing to many of the women and men whom I interviewed that want equal rights, or, as close to equal rights as is possible, for women within Modern Orthodoxy. Ora Giller who, if you will recall, helped start the one of the first ever women’s *minyanim* [plural of *minyan*], said to me, “We started *davening* at Beit Tzvi, which is a partnership minyan. So now that I started *davening* at a partnership minyan, women’s *tefillah*[^47] doesn’t interest me anymore.”

While some Modern Orthodox people truly enjoy the rights that partnership *minyanim* give women, there is also frequently pushback from within the community. Hannah Berger, who fully supports the idea of a partnership *minyan*, explained to me that:

There are certainly many rabbis who say a partnership minyan is not appropriate, not *Halachic*…however the main Orthodox rabbinic body in the US, which is an organization called the Rabbinical Council of America, the RCA, while most of

[^47]: As a point of clarification, both *davening* and *tefillah* mean prayer. *Davening* is the Yiddish word and *Tefillah* is the Hebrew word.
its rabbis will not condone a partnership minyan, they haven’t officially come out
and said that it is forbidden as an official RCA policy.

The rabbis who head the RCA have not forbade people from participating in partnership
minyanim, but as Hannah said, there are many rabbis who condone them, and still others who
argue the practice is not Halachic. While many of the people whom I interviewed enjoy
partnership minyanim, they are often met with contention by those who are comfortable with
a more traditional minyan, including the rabbis that Hannah mentioned, making their fight for
equality even more difficult.

Discomfort with Equality: Further Feelings about Women’s Role in Prayer

While many of the people whom I interviewed enjoy partnership minyanim, there are
other people who, while they have no specific issue with partnership minyanim, do not feel
comfortable with them. Recall Rachel explaining that, while she has nothing against a
partnership minyan, she does not enjoy them, because it is not what she is used to. Adam
Berkowitz displayed a similar sentiment when he said, “If it’s halachikally okay, I have
nothing wrong with it, that isn’t to say that I’m comfortable with it.” These are people who
consider themselves to be abiding by feminist ideals, at least as much as is halachikally
possible. Still, they are uncomfortable with pushing for women’s rights for a number of
reasons, one of which is wanting to stay with what they are comfortable with.

Essentially, Rachel and Adam, and others with similar sentiments, are comfortable
functioning within a framework that not only refuses women certain rights on the basis of
Jewish law, but also refuses them on a more societal level. Within large segments of Modern
Orthodoxy, women are not given rights that they are Halachically allowed to have, and many
of my informants take no issue with this. Of course, in the 1970s people within Modern Orthodoxy were generally uncomfortable with women’s tefillah groups, which are now largely accepted, so it is possible that a similar trend will follow with partnership minyanim. However, given that some people, including Rachel and Adam, currently feel a certain discomfort with partnership minyanim, I would like to look at this through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu’s essay “Gender and Symbolic Violence.”

In the essay, Bourdieu argues that symbolic violence helps keep the subordinate class (in this case, women), feeling as though the power dynamics that exist are natural, or “should be.” Bourdieu makes the argument that the dominating class shapes how society is perceived, so that many aspects of society, which are in fact are socially constructed, are made to appear as natural. He writes, “The dominated apply categories constructed from the point of view of the dominant to the relations to the relations of domination, thus making them appear as natural” (2004: 339). Therefore, Bourdieu argues, the dominated class, through going along with these “natural” parts of culture, continues to reify them, thereby perpetuating their own domination. Bourdieu goes on to say that, “it is quite illusory to believe that symbolic violence can be overcome with the weapons of consciousness and will alone” (2004: 341), suggesting that even if someone is aware of a symbolic violence, and claim they hope to change it, they may still choose to work within the system because of how deeply imbedded it is.

I believe that something similar to what Bourdieu is talking about here is happening with Modern Orthodox people who are uncomfortable with partnership services – they are aware of unequal treatment of women in prayer services, and they are aware that there are services, such as partnership services, that work to combat this. Still, they choose to attend
services that give men more rights than women, as these services embody in some way the inequality that feels comfortable, and appears to be natural, to them.

**Afterlude: Prayer Outside the U.S. – The Holiest Place on Earth**

Arguably one of the most important places for Modern Orthodox Jews in terms of prayer is the Western Wall in Jerusalem, Israel. The Western Wall is thought to be a very holy prayer site, as it is believed to be the last remaining wall from the *Beit HaMikdash*, or The Holy Temple. While people of many denominations come to pray at the Western Wall, its current physical setup is Modern Orthodox in style, meaning that there is a men’s section and a women’s section, separated by a *mechitza*.

![A woman praying at the Western Wall on her wedding day.](image)

Sharon pointed out to me that, unlike some of the other synagogues that I have mentioned, which have roughly equal spacing for men and women, the Western Wall offers
about one third of the space to women as it does to men. On a recent trip to Israel, I was able to go to the Western Wall and witness for myself the lack of space that women are provided at the Western Wall. I also got a first hand look at the *mechitza*, which is approximately five and a half to six feet high, and is completely opaque, allowing for complete separation of men and women.

There is a group called Women of the Wall who have recently begun fighting for increased rights and space for women at the Western Wall. Sharon explained to me her experience when she attended a prayer service led by Women of the Wall. She said:

Um, I went to one in…the first one I went to was in November or December of 2013. And…you hear people on the opposite side of the wall [i.e. on the men’s side] people had a microphone, and the men were doing their own *davening* [praying] on their side of the wall on like a microphone with speakers. So they were trying to -- they were just screaming and blowing whistles and making noise. And I was lucky, nothing was thrown at me, but there were times when people were throwing bags of pee at little girls, because, or like, chairs over the [*mechitza*]. And that’s a crazy thought, like this is the holiest place on earth, and, even among the Jews there is fighting at this place.

Sharon’s point that even at “the holiest place on earth,” Jews are fighting with each other brings up an important point – women’s rights in regards to Jewish prayer are a hotly debated topic, and people are willing to go to extremes to keep women from gaining the rights they are fighting for. While the men at the Western Wall might allow women to pray quietly to themselves on their side of the Wall, the idea of women actually being *heard*, or creating a woman’s *minyan*, is so unthinkable that they are willing to throw bags of pee at
little girls. Of course, as the Western Wall is a place where people of many denominations go to pray, it is possible that the people who threw bags of pee at little girls came from a more right-wing sect of Judaism. Still, it is clear that there are people who are working hard to fight against women’s rights surrounding prayer in Judaism, just as there are women who work towards gaining those same rights.
In the previous chapter, I spoke extensively about differing roles of women and men in the synagogue. There is, however, one very important role in the synagogue that I did not mention – the rabbi. Rabbis are Jewish leaders who have studied *Halacha* (Jewish law) extensively, and are able to hold various leadership positions in their communities. Every synagogue has a rabbi associated with it, and in Modern Orthodoxy, rabbis are always male.\(^48\) When describing her synagogue, Rachel Beed said, “It is a typical Modern Orthodox synagogue – Torah reading always done by men, male rabbi, male assistant rabbi.” In fact, most of the people I spoke with did not even mention the sex of their synagogue’s rabbi until I prompted them to, because it is such a given within the Modern Orthodox community that a rabbi is a man. The rabbi of a synagogue typically gives the sermon during services, will give speeches at important events (such as weddings and bar and bat mitzvahs), and, perhaps most importantly, is the person whom members of the synagogue will go to for *Halachic* decisions. This means that if a person has a question, they could go to their rabbi and ask

\(^{48}\) In other sects of Judaism, such as Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist, women are allowed to be rabbis.
him what they should do based on the *Halacha*, or Jewish law. Recall that *Halacha* is supposed to permeate all aspects of a person’s life. This means that the questions a person might ask their rabbi do not always necessarily have to do with the more religious parts of one’s life, such as going to synagogue, but can also deal with topics such as birth control and travel.

Not all people who become rabbis go on to lead synagogues. Another position many rabbis hold within their community is teacher. Usually, but not always, rabbis teach Judaic (as opposed to general) studies, such as *Gemara*49 or Torah. Importantly, women can also be Judaic studies teachers, and in many Modern Orthodox schools they also hold these positions. Still, these women are not given the title of rabbi because they have not studied in rabbinical school, which, in the Modern Orthodox community, is only open to men. Because of this, these women, unlike their male counterparts, are unable to give *Halachic* rulings, and, as I will argue later in this chapter, are given less respect within the community50 than the men in their positions because they lack the title of rabbi.

Given that rabbis hold such an important position in Modern Orthodoxy, people have strong opinions about who should and should not be a rabbi. Among the people I interviewed, there were three general opinions held with regards to female rabbis – that women cannot be rabbis, that women should not be rabbis, and that women have every right to be rabbis within Modern Orthodoxy. In the coming sections of this chapter, I will delve into each of these opinions in turn, addressing the question of whether or not women are able to be rabbis, and why people feel the way they do about this topic, before examining other ways in which women are able to act as leaders within the Modern Orthodox community.

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49 The book with many rabbinical debates concerning various *halachot*.  
50 Importantly, the lack of respect given to these women is often seen on a societal, not individual, level.
After I examine these findings, I will look at alternative forms of leadership available to women within Modern Orthodoxy, and will address how and why these may or may not be the equivalent of a female rabbi.

It is my hope to shed more light on the question of whether and in what ways women can and cannot lead according to people in Modern Orthodoxy, and the reasoning behind these feelings. One question I will attempt to answer about the topic of female rabbis is why young women, who self identify as believing in gender equality, either do not seem to care about the topic of female rabbis, or are very much against the idea of them. I will also address the question of whether or not the leadership roles given to women are of equal caliber to those of men within the eyes of those in Modern Orthodoxy.

**Women Cannot Be Rabbis**

When I asked Sharon Weiss if she thought women could be rabbis in Modern Orthodoxy, she quickly replied, “Oh. No.” However, when I asked her a follow up question – why? – she took a while to respond, before saying:

I just think -- it’s like -- Um, it’s like a kal v’chomer [all the more so] situation.

If a woman can’t lead *davening*[^51], kal v’chomer[^52] she can’t be a rabbi. Like, if the idea of a woman even being obligated to certain commandments and certain obligations [is problematic], then like all the more so she can’t be a rabbi.

While Sharon readily responded to the question of whether or not a woman could be a rabbi in Modern Orthodoxy, she had trouble coming up with the reason behind her original

[^51]: Praying
[^52]: *Kal v’chomer* roughly translates to mea “all the more so” – the idea is that if a certain situation is plausible, then of course a different situation is also plausible. For example, someone might say, “if an elephant can fit into the house, *kal v’chomer* a mouse can fit into the house.” *Kal v’chomer* can be used to make *Halachic* rulings.
response. She eventually gave me the reason that, since women are unable to lead certain prayers, and since women are not obligated in certain commandments, then all the more so women cannot be rabbis.

However, the variables that must exist for a *kal v’chomer* to work do not come into play in this case. A key aspect necessary for using a *kal v’chomer* is that the two situations being compared must be similar (see footnote for example). In the case of women being able to be rabbis versus women being able to lead parts of the prayer service, the *Halachot* that are at play are not similar enough for a *kal v’chomer* to be applicable. Therefore, it seems to me that just because a woman cannot lead certain pieces of the prayer service does not mean that she cannot be a rabbi.

I believe the reason Sharon struggled to come up with a reason as to why women cannot be rabbis in Modern Orthodoxy is because people do not explicitly state that women cannot be rabbis. In fact, I do not recall a single time during my youth that I was explicitly told, “women cannot become rabbis” (though this was an assumption I fully believed to be true). Though this idea is never explicitly stated, it is implied through various social structures, which I will speak about now. The first, and perhaps most obvious, way in which it is implied that women cannot be rabbis is that there are no female rabbis in Modern Orthodoxy. If there are only male rabbis, young girls are implicitly taught that being a rabbi is not a position that they should hold. Hannah Berger brought up other social structures that are even less obvious that imply that women cannot be rabbis. She said:

I’d say there are many things that can be done, even in an Orthodox environment, even in terms of the pictures you have up on the wall in school, you know, you have rabbi, rabbi, rabbi, rabbi, and you know, even if you have a picture of people
"davening" [praying] at the Kotel [Western Wall] is it male people davening at the Kotel, or female people davening at the Kotel [implying it is a man]…

Hannah’s point that even the artwork that exists in schools can remind girls that only men are rabbis further supports my claim that women are implicitly taught that they are not supposed to be rabbis. Many of my informants were more than willing to tell me their thoughts on women rabbis in Modern Orthodoxy. Dina Gats told me “Modern Orthodox Judaism doesn’t allow for women rabbis so why would there be a woman rabbi?” Dina’s understanding of the implicit lessons she has been taught is that Modern Orthodox Judaism does not just not have women rabbis, but rather that women rabbis are forbidden. Similarly, Maya Stein told me “If I have daughters in the future who want to be rabbis, I would say in Modern Orthodoxy you don’t become rabbis.”

Importantly, because people do not explicitly mention that women cannot be rabbis, the reasoning behind this does not come up. The fact that women cannot be rabbis is taught so implicitly in Modern Orthodoxy aligns nicely with Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of doxa. In Outline of A Theory of Practice, Bourdieu explains doxa as a term for “that which is taken for granted…perceived not as arbitrary, i.e. as one possible order among others, but as a self-evident and natural order which goes without saying and therefore goes unquestioned” (Bourdieu 1977:166). Bourdieu argues that there are certain assumptions that are so taken for granted that they appear natural, and therefore people assume the way it is is the way it must be. Doxa, according to Bourdieu, is “the universe of the undiscussed (undisputed)” (1977: 168). In Modern Orthodoxy, the idea of men being rabbis falls into the field of doxa. It is assumed, and therefore not discussed, that women cannot be rabbis, and this idea is perpetuated through various social structures, which I have spoken about. People do not
question this basic assumption, because it is seen as unquestionable, but they are aware that there are no female rabbis within Modern Orthodoxy, so they simply accept that it is not allowed.

In their book *Of Revelation and Revolution*, Jean and John Comaroff explain a similar idea to doxa, which they refer to as hegemony. They write, “We take hegemony to refer to that order of signs and practices, relations and distinctions, images and epistemologies…that come to be taken-for-granted as the natural and received shape of the world” (1991: 23). The Comaroffs go onto explain that hegemonies hold a great deal of power, and this power “has so often been seen to lie in what it silences, what it prevents people from thinking and saying, what it puts beyond the limits of the rational and the credible” (1991: 23). Within Modern Orthodoxy, the hegemonic idea is that rabbis are male – there generally is no discussion about the potential of female rabbis, at least in large parts of the society. With no discussion, there is no potential for having female rabbis, because it is not even in the realm of debated possibility. Of course, this is not how all women feel. Some people, as I will discuss later, have recently been bringing up the idea of having female rabbis within Modern Orthodoxy. However, the majority of people still automatically assume that rabbis must be male, which is the dominant hegemonic idea within Modern Orthodoxy.

Critically, because the idea of male rabbis is a hegemonic one, many do not question what the reasoning behind it might be, as it is assumed to be natural in some ways. Therefore, many of the people that I spoke to, like Sharon, believe that Modern Orthodoxy prohibits female rabbis, but are unsure as to why. Maya Stein, for example, who strongly believes that women are not supposed to be rabbis in Modern Orthodoxy, told me that “[Women] can’t be a rabbi because Halacha says it.” However, as I will discuss later,
according to some of the more learned informants I spoke to, including a rabbi, there is actually no Halacha against a woman being a rabbi. Where, then, did Maya get her information about the Halacha regarding female rabbis? I believe she picked up on the idea that women are not rabbis in Modern Orthodoxy, and therefore assumed that there was a law against it. When I asked Maya if she could tell me what the Halacha was that said that women could not be rabbis, she said, “I don’t know, but I’m sure I could find it.” Maya so firmly believed that women could not be rabbis that even after she realized she did not know the actual Halacha, she told me:

I think that if someone told me, I can’t be a principal, why can’t I be a principal, if I have the intellectual capability to become a principal then I should be able to do it, I think that’s different than becoming a rabbi because for a rabbi there is some Halacha stopping you from becoming a rabbi, whereas there is nothing stopping me from becoming a principal.

While Maya speaks about the Halacha stopping her from becoming a rabbi, as I have already pointed out, there is no Halacha against female rabbis. Maya’s belief that the Halacha is what prevents women from becoming rabbis speaks to the essentialism that has occurred within Modern Orthodoxy surrounding what a rabbi should be. It is so engrained in her mind that a rabbi must be a man that she has implanted the reasoning behind this in the unchanging laws of her religion. Maya is not alone in her conviction that what the Halacha has to say about female rabbis will play an important role in her feelings about the topic. When I spoke with Rachel Beed about her feelings about female rabbis, she said:

I think I’d be in that in-between ground, because part of me wants to be like, yes! Like, let’s have a female rabbi…let’s be open about it, let’s be moving forward,
let’s be modern about it. But at the same time, like is it \textit{Halachically}\textsuperscript{53} okay, that definitely does have an important place in whether or not that would -- I would be comfortable.

Unlike Maya, Rachel does not outright assume that the \textit{Halacha} prevents women from being rabbis. Rather, she stipulates that she would only be okay with female rabbis if the \textit{Halacha} permits it. One might therefore assume that, if the \textit{Halacha} did permit it, Rachel would feel comfortable with female rabbis, since she specifies that she wants to be open to the idea of female rabbis. However, as I will address in the coming section, just because women can be rabbis according to \textit{Halacha} does not mean that Modern Orthodox people, including Rachel, would be comfortable with having a female rabbi.

\textbf{We Do Not Want Women Rabbis}

When Rachel Beed and I were talking, she mentioned that what the \textit{Halacha} has to say about female rabbis would strongly impact her feelings about whether or not she would be okay with having female rabbis. However, once I pointed out to her that, according to \textit{Halacha}, women can be rabbis, and preceded to ask her if she would therefore be okay with having one, she said:

\begin{quote}
Would I be okay with having a female rabbi? That is a great question. --. Well, one of my teachers in high school, she is by the far one of the smartest women I have ever met in my entire life. Probably more learned than a bunch of the rabbis you see walking around today. She’s not a pulpit rabbi, she doesn’t have the title rabbi…, but she does give sermon on Shabbat. I’m like 99.9\% sure that she does that, so…I guess you can consider her. She is a rabbi without the title, so do I feel
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{53} A way of saying “according to \textit{Halacha}”
comfortable with a female rabbi? I – I – I don’t know, I haven’t really thought about the question. Thinking about it right now, it would definitely be a little bit weird for me, only because I have always had male rabbis.

Rachel’s hesitation in granting this woman, whom she clearly respects, the title rabbi comes from the fact that Rachel is very used to having male rabbis. Even though Rachel became aware of the fact that, *Halachically*, this woman could be granted the title rabbi, Rachel felt some discomfort around the idea of a female rabbi because, according to her, it went against her idea of what a rabbi should be. Still, Rachel told me that this teacher was, to her, a rabbi-like figure, due to her immense knowledge of various topics. If Rachel believed all of these things about her teacher, knew that, according to *Halacha* women could be rabbis, and believed in the notion of gender equality (I spoke about Rachel’s beliefs more extensively in chapter two), why was Rachel so hesitant in granting this woman the official title of rabbi? I believe the answer to this question can be found through the idea of comfort – the people that I interviewed were comfortable with their idea of what a rabbi should be, which included maleness.

When I asked Sharon Weiss if she would be comfortable with having a female rabbi, she said to me:

Oof oof! Um -- I want to say yes, but I don’t know if that’s true. Like I want to say yes, but also, I don’t even think that has to do with the *Halacha* of it, I think it’s just like a mental thing, maybe it’s conditioning…. I just think it’s just a big stigma thing, and I don’t even necessarily think it’s like a *Halachic* thing, but I think, if the only reason I was uncomfortable with a female rabbi would be
because, it’s just something that we don’t see as much, you know, and it’s not something that’s as comfortable and as like familiar, as like a male rabbi.

Sharon Weiss, who hesitates to self identify as Modern Orthodox because she feels as though she wants more rights for women than Modern Orthodoxy generally grants, admits that she does not enjoy the idea of a female rabbi, not because of the Halacha, but because of the comfort that comes along with having a male rabbi. I had a similar conversation with Rebecca Seegar, which went as follows:

KB: Would you be okay with having a female rabbi?

RS: In my [synagogue]?

KB: Yeah.

RS: I don’t think so.

KB: How come?

RS: Because I think it’s out of like comfort, because I’m used to having a male leading it --. And I can’t argue for it based on Halachot.

KB: Do you think there are Halachot on it?

RS: Um -- I think that there are Halachot on it.

Again and again, my participants brought up the idea of “comfort” when speaking about male rabbis, and discomfort when speaking about female rabbis. Interestingly, Rebecca Seegar, like Maya Stein, believes that there are some Halachot that speak about female rabbis. I argue that this has something to do with the fact that these women are fighting conflicting ideals – on the one hand, they believe in feminist ideals of gender equality, but on the other hand, they feel uncomfortable with female rabbis. They therefore
qualify their discomfort with female rabbis by attributing it to *Halacha*, which they are, according to their religion, required to abide by.

Here I would like to bring in the idea of cognitive dissonance, which the American Psychological Association defines as a state in which a “person holds two contradictory beliefs, or when a belief is incongruent with an action that the person had chosen freely to perform. Because this situation produces feelings of discomfort, the individual strives to change one of the beliefs or behaviors in order to avoid being inconsistent” (apa.org54). While cognitive dissonance is a rather Western notion about how the human mind works, I believe there is something to be said about how it influences the beliefs of people in America.

In Janet McIntosh’s, “Going Bush: Black Magic, White Ambivalence and Boundaries of Belief in Postcolonial Kenya,” she writes, “In most western ideologies, ‘beliefs’ are all-or-nothing commitments to the truth value of particular propositions. Stereotypical western ideologies…tend to hinge upon mental states that include well-regulated, internally consistent beliefs” (McIntosh 2006: 260). McIntosh’s point that people in western cultures generally feel as though their thoughts must be internally consistent is important with regards to how the women in my study justify their belief that only men should be rabbis. Because it would be internally inconsistent to say that they believe in gender equality, while simultaneously saying that they only want male rabbis, Rebecca and Maya justify their contradictory thoughts by saying that it must be the *Halacha* preventing the existence of female rabbis, as opposed to their own individual convictions.

Having said that, there are women, including Sharon, who specifically state that it is not the *Halacha*, but simply what she is used to, that impacts her thoughts on female rabbis.

Rebecca, too, says that she cannot root her feelings opposing female rabbis in *Halacha* (though she does believe that *Halachot* do exist surrounding female rabbis). Here again I would like to bring up Bourdieu’s idea that even when the dominated class are made aware of engrained, potentially problematic, aspects of their culture, they will not necessarily wish to change it (2004: 339). These women (and men) wish to continue having rabbis only be male, not necessarily because of the *Halachot*, but because of what they are used to, and what they are comfortable with.

In fact, the idea of having rabbis be male is so deeply engrained for some people, that it is almost impossible to fathom having female rabbis. When I asked Adam Berkowitz what he thought about female rabbis, he said,

> Like I said, if there are other options, I probably wouldn’t go to that service [one with a female rabbi]. [Although], If I was working in Wisconsin, there was only one minyan\(^{55}\) that was like a Shira Chadasha-esque,\(^{56}\) men and women separate, and a female leading certain parts, I would probably go, [because] I prefer davening [praying] in a minyan.

While I asked a question about female rabbis, during his answer Adam shifted to speaking about prayer services that let women lead certain parts of the service. Critically, these prayer services do not have female rabbis associated with them, so it is interesting that Adam made the jump from female rabbis to services in which women lead. The fact that Adam has such trouble comprehending the idea of attending a service with a female rabbi, reframing it in his

\(^{55}\) Minyan is the quorum of ten men required to say certain prayer.  
\(^{56}\) A specific type of prayer service where both men and women lead prayers (again, women only lead the prayers that they are allowed to lead according to *Halacha*.)
mind as a service during which women lead certain prayers,\textsuperscript{57} shows how deeply engrained the idea of male rabbis is in Modern Orthodoxy.

While the people I have spoken about above were generally in favor of having only men as rabbis, every single one of them felt much more strongly about equality within the secular world. Rebecca said to me “Like, I think in the secular world, I think men and women should have equal jobs, but in Modern Orthodoxy, like it’s okay for a rabbi to be only a man.” Similarly, Adam Berkowitz said:

Had you come up to me in the street, had you said, so can you please reply to the statement ‘women can’t be teachers. They can be tutors, they can do other similar things, but they can’t be teachers,’ I would say you’re absolutely ridiculous, that’s absurd, women should teach, they are more loving, they are more caring, they would make better educators, and why can’t they teach? And you were to say, well in Modern Orthodox Judaism, women can do this that and the other, except, this [being rabbis]. I’d say, wow.

Both Adam and Rebecca are sectioning off their ideas about women’s rights – in the secular world, they believe that women should have every opportunity that a man does, while in the religious world, they believe that there are certain roles that only men should hold. Interestingly, Adam’s reaction to the comparison between women being unable to be teachers was one of shock and surprise. Through our conversation, it became clear that he had not thought of the differences between his secular beliefs and his religious beliefs until we spoke. At this point, I would again like to bring up McIntosh’s statement that western ideologies generally do not posit that people should have contradicting beliefs. Critically,

\textsuperscript{57} Which is undoubtedly controversial, but it does exist within Modern Orthodoxy, whereas female rabbis do not.
McIntosh is speaking about *ideologies*, i.e. what western society promotes as correct, not what actually happens in western society. In fact, the diverging beliefs held by many of my participants, including Adam and Rebecca, are great examples of times that westerners do hold internally inconsistent beliefs, but in complicated ways. They have separated their ideologies of gender equality and male dominated roles into two spheres, which allows them to hold conflicting ideas.

Critically, it seems that Adam (like others) does not often think about his religious sphere and secular sphere as separate – recall that in chapter one, I wrote that Adam said that, to him “I think of them [the modern world and Judaism] as a whole.” He believes that aspects of his religiosity fit into his secular life, and vice versa. That may have been part of the reason that he was so shocked to realize that some of his views about women’s roles in Modern Orthodoxy versus the secular world were contradictory. It is possible that it is precisely because he expects his ideals to be consistent, and to work in both aspects of his life, that he felt uncomfortable. Of course, there are people whom I interviewed who do hold more internally consistent beliefs (at least in terms of women’s leadership abilities within Modern Orthodoxy), and I will address the opinions of these people in the coming section.

*We Look Forward to Women Rabbis*

As I mentioned earlier, it turns out that there is no *Halacha* against women being rabbis. When I asked John Lecker, who is knowledgeable on topics of *Halacha*, if there was any *Halachic* reason to not have a female rabbi, he simply replied, “No.” Similarly, when I asked Lisa Steinberg, a teacher of Jewish studies at a Modern Orthodoxy high school, if she would be okay with having a female rabbi, she immediately said “Yes.” Not only do John
and Lisa whole-heartedly believe that women *can* be rabbis since there are no *Halachot* that forbid it, but they also actively look forward to having female rabbis within the Modern Orthodox community. John said to me, “I look forward to the day when we have female rabbis in the Modern Orthodox community.” Because of their excitement about the possibility of women rabbis, John and Lisa tend to use reasoning that, while following the *Halacha*, promotes the idea of having female rabbis. Recall that when I asked Sharon about female rabbis, she said that she did not think women could be rabbis because they were unable to lead a service. When I brought this point up to Lisa, she responded with the following, “There are rabbis who are *cohanim*, and there are certain ritual functions that they can’t do, like they can’t run funerals.” Lisa’s point that there are rabbis who cannot perform certain functions that rabbis traditionally do perform helps refute the idea that women should not be rabbis because they cannot do everything that rabbis traditionally can.

It is interesting to note that Lisa and Sharon invoke different pieces of information that they both already have – they both know that women cannot lead parts of prayer services and that *cohanim* can be rabbis – in order to help prove the points that they want to prove. This again shows that people choose to use parts of what they know in order to maintain the beliefs that they want to believe.

While John and Lisa are both excited about the potential for having female rabbis within Modern Orthodoxy, neither of them know of any current female rabbis, nor do they expect to see any in the near future. When I asked Lisa if she knew any female rabbis in the Modern Orthodox community, she said:

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58 *Cohanim* are the biological descendants of the priests who used to work in the Holy Temple. They are considered to be holier in some ways than other Jews, and therefore are unable to do certain things, including going near dead bodies. They are therefore unable to attend funerals.
Um, in the Modern Orthodox community -- not in leadership positions where they are the only person running a full time *shul* [synagogue]. So I know people here and there who have -- there is a woman in Riverdale who has a *minyan*\(^{59}\) that she leads a minyan once a month kind of thing…. I do not know any Modern Orthodox females with the title rabbi.

Even though Lisa is aware of women who are very knowledgeable about *Halacha*, and she is aware of women who lead *minyans*, she knows that people would not call these women rabbis because they are unable to receive the training that would earn them this title, purely based on their gender. When I asked John, who specifically told me that he looks forward to having female rabbis within Modern Orthodoxy, if he thought Modern Orthodoxy would allow for female rabbis, he said, “Not next year. I mean, eventually yes, but I think it’s going to be a while.” If there are women who seem very qualified to be rabbis, such as the women that Lisa spoke about, and there is no *Halacha* against female rabbis, and people are okay with having female leaders (recall that Rachel Beed, who is uncomfortable with female rabbis in Modern Orthodoxy, told me that she considered one of her female teachers to be more learned than many of the rabbis she knew) then why does John believe that it will be a while before Modern Orthodoxy accepts the notion of female rabbis?

I believe the answer lies in what I have already spoken about – that people enjoy what they are used to and comfortable with – the hegemonic, doxie ideas – and therefore do not wish to change their ritual practices (i.e., male rabbis). The idea that rabbis must be male has become so reified within Modern Orthodoxy that, as Bourdieu explained, even the dominated class (i.e., women) generally accept it as natural, and do not wish to change it. Of course, not all people are okay with the status quo – quite a few of the people whom I spoke with said

\(^{59}\) Prayer quorum of ten, which means that she has a prayer service that she leads.
they look forward to a time with Modern Orthodox female rabbis. Critically, however, these people are all aware of the fact that the majority of Modern Orthodox people would not be okay with a female rabbi, and therefore do not tend to push for having female rabbis. When speaking with Hannah Berger, she said to me:

So, I would be fine with it [having a female rabbi], I think it also depends on what you think of the job of a rabbi in a synagogue. I would be perfectly comfortable with it. I think of a rabbi as someone who gives sermons, who provides pastoral care, I think of a rabbi of someone who makes *Halachic* decisions…. And I think many people within Orthodoxy would also be comfortable with that, I think they’re less comfortable with calling her a rabbi, because I think it has become a social issue as much as anything else.

Note that Hannah is aware that having female rabbis is more of a social issue than a *Halachic* one – she claims that people are okay with women giving sermons in synagogue and making *Halachic* decisions, but are not okay with women being granted the title rabbi. She feels that it is the idea of having a female rabbi that is the real issue for Modern Orthodox people, and she is not alone. Sharon Weiss told me, “If someone said Modern Orthodox female rabbi, everyone would go bonkers.” Like Hannah, Sharon is not saying that people would necessarily be disturbed at the thought of women acting as leaders, but rather it is the idea of a female rabbi that might upset them. Nancy Bloom also had insightful comments about the how Modern Orthodox people might feel about having female rabbi. She explained:

I would be happy to have a female rabbi. There is no reason a woman can't play all the roles a Modern Orthodox rabbi plays. I think the left wing of Modern Orthodoxy is becoming comfortable with women religious leadership, but I am
not sure they will be regarded as the complete equals of men when it comes to issuing *psak Halacha*, or when it comes to being listed as Rabbi or Rabbi equivalent as the "head" of a *shul* [synagogue]. The rest of Modern Orthodoxy would find it too threatening to the status quo, which I think they want to hold on to for security in a fast changing world.

Nancy, much like Sharon and Hannah, picks up on the idea that the idea of having female rabbis is not necessarily a *Halachic* issue – the reason people are against having a female rabbi has more to do with their desire to keep the status quo as it is, making female rabbis more of a social issue than a purely religious one. Lisa Steinberg summed up this idea nicely, saying:

I think...that kind of change happens very slowly, and people are scared, I don’t think it has to do with any kind of *Halachic* issue at all, I think people understand that it has nothing to do with any *Halachic* issue, it’s just when you have the…a certain model of a leader, that’s what your model of a leader is.

Of course, as I have already discussed, there are people who do believe that women cannot be rabbis because of *Halacha*, an idea that Lisa dismisses, but Lisa does make an important point here – that part of what is threatening is that a female rabbi would go against the model of a leader that Modern Orthodox Jews are used to, and that is what they find threatening. Shira Barto echoes the idea that Modern Orthodoxy has a certain model of a leader, which is a male rabbi. She said, “I think the word rabbi comes with a lot of baggage, like it’s a very specific position. And when Modern Orthodoxy wanted to give female people also a clergy position, they didn’t want to give it the title of rabbi.” To change this model of

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60 *Psak Halacha* are decisions made based on *Halacha*, and, in Modern Orthodoxy, this right is reserved for rabbis.
a leader would, as Nancy said, change the status quo, which many people do not seem to want.

If some people are comfortable with the status quo, one might wonder why others are hoping to enact change, and to start having female rabbis. As I will explain shortly, there are certain leadership positions open to women within Modern Orthodoxy, so why do some want to see women with the title “rabbi?” I believe there are three important reasons as to why some are advocating for female rabbis, which I will outline below. The first is perhaps rather obvious, but it is still worth stating – if there are no female leaders for women to look up to, then they will assume that they cannot lead. This is precisely why so many of the other women I spoke with said that women should not be rabbis. These other women did not think women less capable than men in terms of the position. Rather, they simply have never been taught to expect to see women in these roles, and therefore it does not cross their mind that women should be able to be rabbis, just as men are.

The second reason some wish to see women rabbis has to do with something Shira said – the idea that the term rabbi comes with a certain amount of baggage. Shira used this idea to explain to me why women are not called rabbis in Modern Orthodoxy, but it can also be used as a reason for why some people want women to be granted the title rabbi. Even if women are granted other positions of authority, if they are not called rabbi, they will not be able to gain the same respect that rabbis have, because their title will not come with the same “baggage” and authority that rabbi does.

The third reason that some people fight for women’s ability to be rabbis has to do with something that Nancy said. Recall that Nancy pointed out that it is rabbis who issue psak, or Halachic rulings. This means that it is rabbis, and only rabbis, who are able to make
decisions based on their interpretations of Halacha. If only men are able to hold the position that makes these decisions, then men are able to make decisions that affect everyone (both men and women), while women are not. This is problematic because it allows men to dominate the public sphere, which allows them to maintain their authority over women. In fact, the domination of the public sphere is so influential in male supremacy that, in her article, “Women, Culture, and Society,” Michelle Rosaldo argues that it is domination of the public sphere that keeps women subordinate to men in various cultures, even when they may have considerable power in the home (1974: 17-18).

I believe that it is because of Rosaldo’s idea about public versus private spheres that it is important to move women into the public sphere, and allow them to make Halachic decisions – a right that men already have. Some people, including Ora Giller, very strongly believe that it is critical that women be able to give psak (Halachic rulings). She said, “I think that once we have more women in position to be poskim, which we are, which is happening, um, I think more and more and more, they’ll paskin [make Halachic decisions] differently. I think there will be things that will change.”

Ora’s point is that getting women into leadership positions will cause a positive feedback loop, in which more and more women will start to hold leadership positions. It is through this, she argues, that women will start having more of an equal role within Modern Orthodoxy. While there are not yet female rabbis within Modern Orthodoxy, Ora points out that more positions of leadership have recently been open to women, which is an important aspect of Modern Orthodox feminism that I will address in the coming section.

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61 Poskim are people who can give psak, i.e. make Halachic decisions.
Alternative Leadership Positions for Women

Before I write about the newer forms of leadership that are becoming available to women in Modern Orthodoxy, I would like to first briefly mention another leadership position that women are able to occupy within Modern Orthodoxy, and that is women acting as teachers. At my Modern Orthodox high school, and in many other Modern Orthodox high schools around America, both men and women are employed as teachers. All of my younger participants told me that both men and women were able to teach Judaic subjects in their high schools, and none of my participants thought any less of their female teachers. Still, there are aspects of the way that Judaic classes are taught within schools that may implicitly send the message that men are “better” at teaching these subjects. Hannah Berger mentioned to me that at a well regarded high school in New Jersey, “technically [women can teach boys Gemara], but the principal says he has never found a woman who is capable.” She then sarcastically added, “Right, so, I’m sure he is looking really hard.” By not hiring any women to teach Gemara, the principal is making the statement that women are not as skilled as men when it comes to understanding a more intellectual part of Judaic learning. And this high school is not alone in its uneven hiring of men and women for certain courses. While speaking with Shira Barto about the seminary that she studied at in Israel, she said, “More than half [of the teachers] were men. There were a lot of rabbis, there were a lot of females on staff, but some of them [the women] served as spiritual or emotional guidance. They didn’t teach as many classes as the rabbis did.” By having male staff teach classes and having women act as spiritual guidance, Shira’s school may have been implying that men are better at the more intellectual aspects of learning, while women are better suited for helping

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62 A text containing many Halachot and rabbinic debates. Gemara is generally considered to be a very intellectual course in terms of Judaic studies, as it requires much abstract thought.
students with their emotional problems. This holds within it aspects of the arguably sexist belief that men are better at problem solving, while women are better at being warm and nurturing.

Of course, not all Modern Orthodox schools are like this – at the high school and seminary where I studied, there were more equal numbers of male and female staff, and both men and women were able to teach Gemara. In fact, at my seminary, of the five Gemara teachers, three were female and two were male. Still, even in this, arguably more progressive, seminary, there were customs that could imply that male teachers were still superior in some ways. When it came to addressing our teachers, we always had to call the male teachers “Rabbi” followed by their last name, whereas we were taught to call our female teachers by their first name. Though this difference is perhaps minor, the implication is that we are meant to think of our male teachers more formally, and to grant them more respect. The courses that men and women teach, the roles they hold within schools, and the way in which students address them can all affect how their students – both male and female – think about gender differences and equality.

While women have been able to be teachers within Modern Orthodoxy for quite some time, more recently there have been an increasing number of opportunities for them to act as Modern Orthodox community leaders. In 2009, a school was founded based on the belief that women should be able to “achieve positions of leadership within the Orthodox community that were on par with the rabbi” (yeshivamaharat.org⁶³), just as men can. The women who graduate from this school, who learn the same subjects as men who are studying to become rabbis, are given the title of Maharat. When I spoke to Hannah Berger about what Maharats learn, she said, “they are specifically trained in the standard rabbinical training of

*kashrut* [dietary laws], *aveilut* [mourning laws], *chagim* [holidays], Shabbat, so that they would theoretically --I mean, so that they would be able to -- *paskin* [make Halachic decisions].” While the idea of *Maharat* is not looked upon favorably by all Modern Orthodox people, the people whom I spoke with generally seemed to think it was a good idea. When Maya and I spoke about *Maharats*, she said, “I think that if a woman learns as much as a man, and has all the same knowledge as a rabbi, then they should also earn some respectable title, like a rabbi, because if they go through all this training and are knowledgeable, there is no reason why they don’t deserve the same respect.”

Maya’s support of *Maharats* comes from her belief that men and women who learn the same amount should receive the same amount of respect if they hold the same position – a very feminist notion. However, while these women learn what male rabbis learn, the question becomes will they get the same respect as male rabbis if they are not given the same title? Many of my informants seemed to think that *Maharats* would in fact not be granted the same respect as rabbis. When Nancy Bloom and I spoke about *Maharats*, we had the following conversation:

KB: Do you know what *Maharats* are?

NB: Yes.

KB: How do you feel about the notion of *Maharats* in Modern Orthodoxy?

NB: Great idea in principle, but names and titles matter and I don't think they are on a track to full Rabbinic Authority.

I had a similar conversation with John Lecker, who, when I asked if he felt that a *Maharat* could be thought of in a similar vein to a female rabbi, said no. When I asked why, he said, “Because I don’t think they are granted the same kind of authority to lead a community.”
Lisa Steinberg held a similar opinion to both John and Nancy – our conversation went as follows:

KB: Do you think the title Maharat and the title rabbi carry the same weight?
LS: Nope, I don’t
KB: Do you think they should?
LS: Um, I think women should be called rabbi.

Clearly, John, Lisa, and Nancy all feel that, while the idea of Maharat is nice in principle, it is not the same as rabbi. I believe the reason behind this has something to do with something that Shira Barto said in a quote I used earlier in this chapter – she mentioned that the word rabbi comes with a lot of “baggage.” When I asked Shira if she thought rabbis and Maharats are equal, she said, “I think sociologically they are not seen in the same regard by most people at this time. Because Maharat is newer, and I mean the concept of rabbi has been around for hundreds and hundreds of years.” One reason that rabbis hold so much authority is because, in Modern Orthodoxy, they are held in the highest regard. They have been around for so long, and their titles alone demand a certain amount of respect, whereas Maharat is a new concept that does not garner the same respect. Dina Gats summed it up nicely by saying “If your purpose is to create equality, then the Maharat thing would have to be exactly the same as man rabbi’s ordainment or whatever.” And, since titles do matter, as Lisa argues, Maharats will not be given the same respect as their male counterparts unless they are given the same title as the men.

Of course, there is the possibility that Maharats might one day become rabbis – Ora Giller said, “Those women [Maharats] are planning to be rabbis. That’s what they want. Will they ever get to? Will anyone give them a pulpit? Who knows.” While Ora is hopeful
that having Maharats is a step in the direction of having female rabbis, she does qualify that Modern Orthodox society has to be comfortable enough with the concept of it before these women, even if they are granted a title, are able to act as leaders in the community.

In addition to Maharats, the other fairly new leadership position that women are able to hold within Modern Orthodoxy is a Yoetzet Halacha. Unlike Maharats, who are meant to be able to make Halachic decisions in all realms of Judaism, Yoetzet Halachas are supposed to give advice to women on specifically feminine issues, such as menstruation. When I spoke to Rebecca Seegar about what Yoetzet Halachas do, she said, “Well, I’m not exactly sure what it is, but from my experience it’s like women you can go to if you have a question, they’ll tell you what to do instead of going to a rabbi.” When I then asked her what sort of questions women go to the Yoetzet Halachas for, she said, “I feel like, mostly women go to them with like, more personal questions, that they’d be embarrassed to go to a rabbi about.” Interestingly, when I asked Rebecca how she thought Yoetzet Halachas compare to rabbis, she said, “Well, men can be rabbis, but women can be Yoetzet Halachas.” To Rebecca, being a Yoetzet Halacha is comparable to being a rabbi, and Maya felt similarly. She said:

If I have daughters in the future who want to be rabbis, I would say in Modern Orthodoxy you don’t become rabbis, but there are other opportunities for you to take a Halachic leadership role, like you can become a Yoetzet Halacha, where you can have training in the area of nida [menstruation], where it’s like women’s purity laws, and you can have your role there.

Both Rebecca and Maya were comfortable with saying that, while women cannot become rabbis, they can become Yoetzet Halachas, and that is enough, because it is a leadership position. However, Yoetzet Halachas are not the same as rabbis, because their main job is
addressing only female issues, and they therefore have very little authority in the male or mixed gender sphere of life.

Crucially, while Yoetzet Halachas do not even have the same amount of authority as Maharot, there are certain communities within Modern Orthodoxy that are not even comfortable with having them issue decisions for women. John Lecker relayed to me the following anecdote about where he lives:

We have a Yoetzet Halacha that is sponsored by two shuls [synagogues]. Why is it only sponsored by two shuls? Because the other shuls don’t want to sponsor the Yoetzet Halacha. Now, why is that? In part it’s because anything that they loosely associate with the feminist movement they resist, and in part it’s out of a conviction that many of the rabbis of [where I live] and many other rabbis…will openly write about, that psak [Halachic decision making] is an aspect of Jewish life that is owned by rabbis and since women can’t be rabbis, they therefore do not have a part in psak. They would argue that there are other areas in Jewish life that they can have very important, significant role in, just not psak.

I believe that the idea that only men should be allow to work in the realm of Halachic decisions is problematic for numerous reasons which I have previously outlined, but John makes another important point that I would like to focus on. Part of the issue that Modern Orthodox people have when it comes to Maharats and Yoetzet Halachas is that these movements, when stripped down to their core, are about giving women more rights, which is something that large parts of the Modern Orthodox community still resists. That is why some of my informants so desperately want to get women into positions of authority – it is

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64 He lives in a place where there are upwards of ten synagogues.
through this, they argue, that women will start having more public power, which will in turn allow for more female leadership.

**Other Alternatives: Women in the Home**

However, while some of my informants fully believe that women should have roles of authority in the public sphere, there are other people who argue that women do act as leaders within the Modern Orthodoxy community through their role in the home. Shira Barto said to me:

A large part of the women’s role, not that it doesn’t apply to men, but that men, it isn’t like their number one priority is shalom bayit, keeping peace and unity within a family, and obviously that’s on men to do, too. But men are seen as having a role in the community and services in synagogue, and that’s like their specialty. And women’s specialty is within a family structure.

To Shira, a woman’s role is just as important as a man’s, but her role is meant to take place in the home, while a man’s role takes place in public life. Adam Berkowitz articulated a similar feeling to me, saying:

All these things that women can do [including raising kids] -- I don’t think people realize how necessary and important and special women are in Jewish life.... I think, like I said women deserve equal rights in secular life, that’s not to say that they shouldn’t -- people view women as subjugated in Judaism to a much greater extent than they are, and I think people should start to learn the rationale behind women’s roles and how important they are in Jewish framework. Not to say that women shouldn’t be able to feel that they are less, I don’t think women are less....
I think that women have to uphold Halacha as much as men do, just because teaching your children and being a role model.

Shira and Adam both believe that a woman’s role, while in the home, can still be viewed as a leadership role. They argue that women lead in the home, or what can be seen as the private (as opposed to public) sphere. In her essay, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture,” Sherry Ortner bases her argument on the idea that men tend to occupy the public sphere, while women occupy the private one. Unlike Shira and Adam, however, she views this difference as inherently problematic when it comes to women’s rights. She writes, “Now, since women are associated with, and indeed are more or less confined to, the domestic context, they are identified with this lower order of social/cultural organization” (Ortner 1974: 79). According to Ortner, even if women lead in the private sphere, they will continue to be subjugated by men.

While Shira and Adam argue that women are able to take leadership roles in the home, Lisa and John argue that in fact men should start to take more of a role in the home, and that this will impact the role women are able to hold in the public sphere. John said to me:

For me, at this point, the more important arena of human experience, more important than the area of ritual, in regard to feminist innovation is the home. You know I think the question of who leins [reads Torah] and who doesn’t lein is important, and it does have to do with leadership. [But] I think that when we can deeply consider the roles of men and women in the house, when husbands can raise children and cook and do dishes…when all of those things change…. When
that domestic sphere ends up being a shared sphere, then I think other things are
gothing to follow suit.

Similarly, Lisa said:

I also think, much more as I get older and much more as a parent, it’s become
very clear to me that the biggest change in movement is actually not in any of
these ritual things. Like what needs to happen is not, it is so much less important
to push for women to be in a minyan as it is to um, in our community, thinking
about men taking a greater role in parenting and in doing the laundry and in
cleaning the house. Just in terms of what actually makes a difference in people’s
lives, so much of the issue has nothing to do with 
Halacha, and has everything to
do with how men and women see their roles in family life, and I think that’s the
big deal.

What Lisa and John are arguing is that, in order to find equality in general, what
needs to change, perhaps even more so than women taking on roles in the public sphere, is
men’s role in the private sphere. Their thoughts echo those of Michelle Rosaldo, who writes,
“Finally, I suggested that the most egalitarian societies are not those in which male and
female are opposed or are even competitors, but in which men value and participate in the
domestic life of the home. Correspondingly, they are the societies in which women can
readily participate in important public events” (Rosaldo 1974: 41).

Perhaps it is through a change in men’s role in the private sphere that Modern
Orthodoxy might see a shift in women’s role in leadership, and their ability to make 
Halachic
decisions and become rabbis. What is clear is that, in order to reach the feminist ideal of
gender equality within Modern Orthodoxy, many changes—some of which many seem to resist, such as female rabbis—must occur.
A Brief Introduction: Various Aspects of Looking Like a Woman

In the previous two chapters I have explored two rather public positions for women in Modern Orthodox Judaism – women in synagogue and women in leadership. At this point I would like to explore something that centers more on the individual women – how women are and are not supposed to look. The overarching theme of the chapter will be about how women are expected to look and dress, and what this says about Modern Orthodox ideas of gender conformity, specifically in terms of what it means to be a woman. In order to address this topic, I will focus on three specific aspects of Modern Orthodox tradition related to dress, appearance, and the public presentation of femininity, the physical body and gender conformity – 1) ideas of how rabbis should look, 2) feelings about who should wear tefillin (phylacteries) and tallit (prayer shawls), and 3) ideas of tzniut (modesty) – and examine how gender plays a role in each of these. Though I explored the idea of female rabbis extensively in the previous chapter, I believe it is important to take another quick look at some of the reasoning behind why some Modern Orthodox people have such an aversion to the idea of female rabbis, focusing now on people’s both conscious and unarticulated notions of the physical image of the rabbi. I believe people’s attitudes towards who a rabbi should be, or,
more specifically, what a rabbi should look like will help shed light on ideas of how dress, appearance, and the physical body relate to the public presentation of gender conformity within Modern Orthodoxy. I will then turn my attention to feelings concerning women wearing *tefillin*, which are small leather boxes worn on the forehead and upper arm during prayer, and *tallit* (plural is *tallitot*), which is a prayer shawl. In Modern Orthodoxy, both *tefillin* and *tallitot* are traditionally only worn by men, though very recently a small number of women have begun to wear them as well. I will discuss people’s ideas about whether or not women should be able to wear *tefillin* and *tallitot*, and how these responses reflect Modern Orthodoxy’s feelings about gender conformity. Finally, in this chapter I will address the idea of *tzniut*, or modesty, and the connotations it now has within Modern Orthodoxy. Though modesty is a rather broad topic, *tzniut* is generally used in reference to women’s (and critically not men’s) wardrobes. I will explore the connotations this has in terms of ideas of what women should wear, and how this may reflect feelings about how women should act.

Through these three topics, I hope to show a breadth of information about how people in the Modern Orthodox community feel (sometimes unconsciously) about what it means to be a woman, and the beliefs they have with regards to the different positions men and women should hold. This is important because, while previous chapters have examined different roles that men and women are expected to hold, an equally important aspect of the gender binary that exists, and that many people seem to enjoy, is reified through the differences in appearance of men and women.
**Issues with Female Rabbis: They Do Not Look Like a Rabbi Should**

Recall that, in the previous chapter, some of my informants spoke about the position of rabbi as being reserved for men in part because it has always been a male position. Specifically, when speaking about the idea of female rabbis, Shira Barto said that women should be able to be *Maharot*, while men should be rabbis. When I asked her why she thought the term rabbi should not be applied to women, she said, “I think the word rabbi comes with a lot of baggage, like it’s a very specific position…. I think, when people picture a rabbi they picture a specific thing.” What Shira is referring to when she mentions that people have a specific image that they picture when they think of rabbis, she is alluding to the image of a man. Similarly, Lisa Steinberg said “It’s just when you have the…a certain model of a leader, that’s what your model of a leader is,” implying that people are comfortable with the idea of a male rabbi, and therefore it is hard for them to picture a female rabbi, as it conflicts with their image of what a rabbi should be.

Of course, at least part of the reason that Modern Orthodox people picture a man when they think about the word rabbi is that, at least for now, only men can be rabbis. While there is no *Halachic* (lawful) prohibition against female rabbis, the way Modern Orthodox society is currently organized, there is no way for women to enter rabbinical school. This, I believe, in some ways exemplifies the strict gender binary that exists within Modern Orthodoxy. There are certain roles – leadership roles in particular – that are reserved for men, even though there is no *Halacha* against women holding these positions.

For the purposes of this chapter, it is important to portray the idea that people have very clear ideas about what roles men and women hold within the community, to the point

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65 A female leadership position that is theoretically similar to that of a rabbi. See previous chapter for a more in depth discussion of the topic.
that simply the word “rabbi” conjures images of a man. The main point that I am hoping to convey is that people have very specific ideas of what men and women should physically look like, and there is a general discomfort in Modern Orthodoxy when people violate these norms. As I will show in the next section of this chapter, there are other Mitzvot (commandments) and traditions that have to do with the physical body and are historically done by primarily one gender, and when people of the other gender choose to fulfill these commandments, there can be tremendous backlash from within the community.

_Tefillin and Tallit: Background Halachot_

As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, in Modern Orthodoxy the mitzvot (commandments) of putting on tefillin (phylacteries) and tallitot (prayer shawls) are generally done only by men. Before I get into what people think about the gendering of these mitzvot, I will give a brief background on both. Tefillin, or phylacteries, are leather boxes traditionally worn during prayer. Within the boxes the four passages from the Bible that command people to wear the tefillin are written on parchment. I have copied two of these passages below. In Deutoronomy 11:18 it is written: “Therefore shall ye lay up these My [God’s] words in your heart and in your soul; and ye shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes” (Mechon-Mamre). Similarly, in Deuteronomy 6:8, after God gives various commandments to the Jewish people, God says, “And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thy hand, and they shall be for frontlets between

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66 While this general discomfort does exist, as with all “general” ideas within a community, there are people who do not feel this discomfort. As I spoke about in the previous chapter, there are many people who support the idea of having female rabbis within Modern Orthodoxy.

67 Though tefillin and tallit are different mitzvot (commandments), for the sake of clarity, I will be addressing them in the same section. This does not mean I will treat them as if they are the same — they are distinct mitzvot, and I will address them as such.
thine eyes” (Mechon-Mamre). Tefillin are supposed to remind the wearer of all of the deeds and commandments God has issued onto them.

Interestingly, the commandment to wear tefillin in the Bible itself is not restricted to men, and a similar sentiment can be found in the discussion of tefillin in the Talmud. In fact, some of the rabbis whose opinions were taken down in the Talmud write that women are obligated in putting on tefillin, just as men are (Eruvin 98b)! Some other rabbis from the Talmudic era do not believe that women are obligated to wear tefillin, as it is considered a “positive time-bound mitzvah,” which, as I explained in chapter three, women are exempt from, but critically, these Talmudic rabbis still believe that women are still allowed to put on tefillin (Berachot 3:3).

When looking at the Biblical source for the commandment for wearing a tallit (prayer shawl), which can be found in Numbers 15:38, it is also evident that women are not prohibited from fulfilling the commandment. This passage reads: “Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them throughout their generations fringes in the corners of their garments, and that they put with the fringe of each corner a thread of blue” (Mechon-Mamre). The tallit is a four-cornered garment, and on each of the four corners there are fringes, also called tzitzit. The reason for wearing a tallit is to remind the Jewish people of the commandments given to them by God (Numbers 15:39). Similar to the passage in the Bible, and like the Talmudic sources about tefillin, the Talmudic sources about wearing tallitot seem to allow women to wear them. In fact, the discussion that goes on is whether or not women are as obligated as men – there does not appear to be a question as to whether or not they are allowed to wear the tallit. The translation of the Talmudic source is roughly

68 The collection of rabbinic writings that holds within it many Halachic decisions.
“The following are obligated in the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit*: Priests and Levites and Israelites and converts and women and slaves. Rabbi Shimon says women are exempt because *[tzitzit]* are positive time-bound *mitzvot* (Menachot 43a).

Both these sources and the sources for *tefillin* almost unanimously conclude that women are allowed to partake in the *mitvot*. Later on in time, some rabbis, including Maimonides, thought that women should be allowed to wear *tefillin* or *tallitot*, but argued that they could not say the blessing over the *mitzvah*. Still, even in this time, there were rabbis, including Rabbeinu Tam, who believed that women should be able to say the blessings as they performed these commandments. Crucially, though there was debate about whether or not women would be able to say the blessing, the rabbis were still accepting of women putting on *tefillin* and *tallitot*. However, during the 16th century, Rabbi Moshe Isserles writes that women are allowed to put on the *tallit* with a blessing unless they are doing it to appear particularly observant, in which case they should not don the *tallit* at all (Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chaim 17:2). Rabbi Isserles goes further to comment that people should object to women wearing *tefillin*.

During our interview Hannah Berger stated that Rabbi Isserles’ claim may be where the idea that women should not put on both *tallit* and *tefillin* comes from. She said:

> Until the time of the *Shulchan Aruch*, it was probably still an open question.

And then…Rabbi Moshe Isserles, whose commentary on the *Shulchan Aruch* is

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69 *Tzitzit* being the fringes on the *tallit*, so this law, though it says the word *tzitzit*, applies to wearing a *tallit*.

70 Maimonides lived in the 12th century

71 Often times when a person is completing a certain *mitzvah*, they are expected to say the blessing that goes along with it in order to sanctify it and fully complete the *mitzvah*.

72 Rabbeinu Tam lived in the 12th century

73 The *Shulchan Aruch* is a book in which all of the *halachot* are written down. It was written by Rav Yosef Karo and was commented on by Rabbi Moshe Isserles.
really what [many Modern Orthodox people] go by, say that women should not [wear *tefillin*], and that was really kind of the last time it was discussed…. And that is 500 years ago.

According to Hannah, it is this passage that has stuck in the minds of Modern Orthodox people, which is why, even though there are so many sources that seem to support women wearing *tefillin* and *tallitot*, in modern day Modern Orthodoxy, it is so rare to find women wearing *tefillin*. Many of my informants, with the exception of Hannah and perhaps a few others, were in fact completely unaware that women were at some point in history allowed to wear *tefillin* and *tallitot*. The idea that these two garments should only be worn by men was passed down through generations in way that the source of this tradition now goes back to time immemorial (when in fact the tradition is only about 500 years old), and therefore currently almost no Modern Orthodox women wear them.

**Are Tefillin and Tallit Acceptable for Women? Ideas from Within the Community**

A woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment; for whosoever doeth these things is an abomination unto the Lord thy God.

– Deuteronomy 22:5

During my fieldwork I attended numerous Modern Orthodox services, and not once did I see a woman wearing *tefillin* or *tallit*. In fact, even before I started my official fieldwork, when I was younger and I went to services to pray (recall that growing up I was a member of the Modern Orthodox community), I never saw a woman wearing *tefillin*. The one time I did see a woman wearing a *tallit* was at my Bat Mitzvah – that woman was my
mother, and I remember feeling horrified because I thought she was performing a mitzvah that only men performed. The people whom I interviewed echoed the idea that it is unusual for women to wear tefillin and tallitot in Modern Orthodox services. None of my female participants themselves wore tefillin or tallitot on a regular basis. Aviva Kutzner told me about the one woman she remembered wearing a tallit in Modern Orthodox services. She said, “On Yom Kippur, for example I saw a woman in the Orthodox minyan [prayer service] who was wearing a tallit.” Similarly, Adam Berkowitz told me about the one woman he knows who puts on tefillin for the daily prayer service, and she is a Conservative rabbi. I believe both of the exceptions that Adam and Aviva brought up help prove the point that it is a rarity to find a woman wearing a tallit or tefillin in Modern Orthodox communities. The reason Adam and Aviva brought up these instances is because they stood out in their minds – they were not normal occurrences. In fact, the reason Adam told me about a Conservative rabbi, and not an Orthodox woman, is because, like most of my informants, he did not know any Modern Orthodox women who do wear tefillin. Of course, because Adam himself is a man, he always wraps tefillin when he is supposed to during prayer.

If, as I stated before, it is considered acceptable in both the Torah and the Talmud for women to wear tefillin, why, then, do most Modern Orthodox women choose to not fulfill this mitzvah (commandment)? Why has it traditionally become accepted as a mitzvah that only men do? Of course, one of the main reasons is the commentary of Rabbi Moshe Isserles, which Hannah brought up, and the fact that his decision regarding women wearing tallitot and tefillin is now generally seen as having been uncontested. Very few of my informants, as I said before, and critically none of my younger informants, were even aware

74 A few of my participants who went to Conservative programs or schools put on tefillin or tallitot once or twice, but never in a Modern Orthodox setting.
that there was a time in which women were allowed to don tefillin and tallitot. They were all also unaware that Rabbi Moshe Isserles’ decision was regarded by many as the reason behind women not wearing tefillin and tallitot. There are, however, multiple other reasons that my informants gave as to why women do not wear tefillin or tallitot.

The first reason given is that some women feel as though they should not take on a mitzvah that they are not obligated to take on unless they are prepared to fully take on the mitzvah. Recall that both the mitzvah of putting on tefillin and the mitzvah of putting on a tallit were, and are, considered by some rabbis to be positive time-bound commandments, which women are not obligated to take on. Therefore, some of my female informants felt that they should not take on the mitzvot unless they were willing to fully commit (i.e., put on tefillin and tallit every day). Sharon Weiss, who grew up Conservative said to me, “I didn’t really feel comfortable wearing tefillin… because there is this idea that if you take on one of the obligations you [should fully partake].” Similarly, Dina Gats explained to me that women should not observe these commandments because:

It’s not commanded [for] women, [that] they have to take on the commandment. So, until you’re ready to take on the commandment and fully do it, there is no point in making, forcing every single woman to wear tallit and tefillin. So then, what [if they don’t fully complete the commandment] are you [going to] make them all have sins?

Both Sharon and Dina say that they believe women should not wear tefillin or tallitot unless the women are willing to “fully” take on the commandment, because otherwise women should not perform positive time-bound mitzvot. However, both Shira and Dina are perfectly okay with allowing women to pray, which is also a positive time-bound mitzvah, and
therefore something they are not obligated in. What then, is the reasoning behind their feelings that women should not take on this commandment?

I believe the answer lies in the tradition of Modern Orthodoxy, which involves both practice and appearance – because women have not, at least for about the past 500 years, been putting on tefillin and tallitot, people’s feeling is that women should not be doing so. In order to illustrate this point, I would like to look at other reasons people gave me for why women do not fulfill these commandments. When I asked Aviva if she felt that women should be allowed to put on tefillin or tallitot, she said, “So, with those kind of issues, I don’t think it’s really my place to say women should be allowed to do this or allowed to do that.” Similarly, when I posed the same question to Sharon, she said, “In theory I’d like to find a way to say that it is okay for women to wear tallitot and tefillin, but…I don’t think I know enough of the laws to rationalize it and justify it.” Here we see two women, both of whom identify as having feminist ideals, who, instead of saying “I believe women should wear tefillin and tallitot, and I want to see a source to say they cannot,” are assuming that women cannot fulfill these commandments. In fact, of the two, only Sharon says that she would like to find a source that justifies women wearing tefillin and tallitot – Aviva just says that she feels as though it is not her place to push for women to be allowed to fulfill certain commandments. It is through the socialization that occurs in Modern Orthodoxy, through seeing only men wear tefillin and tallitot, that people are taught to believe that women should not perform these mitzvot.

Crucially, this is not the only voice that can be heard in Modern Orthodoxy. Many of my older participants did believe that women should be allowed to put on tefillin and tallitot, if they so choose. When speaking about the female Conservative rabbi who put on tefillin,
Adam said to me, “Who am I to say what is okay? I practice the way I want [so she should practice how she wants].” While Adam was speaking specifically about a Conservative woman in this case, the sense that I got while talking with him was that he would be okay with a Modern Orthodox woman doing the same thing.

A few of my other informants also support the idea of women putting tefillin and tallitot, but, unlike Adam, they seemed to caution against the political backlash that might ensue. Ora Giller commented on a recent decision made by the principal of a Modern Orthodox high school to let two female students wear tefillin. She mentioned that the rabbi, in his statement, specified two things – first, that he was not issuing a blanket allowance for all women to wear tefillin, and second, that he wanted very much to separate the political from the halachic side of his decision. The reason this rabbi let these two girls wear tefillin was that they had shown true commitment to the mitzvah, and this had been their family custom, and, importantly, that there was halachic precedence for women being able to wear tefillin (see the multiple Talmudic sources I mentioned earlier). He said, however, that even with the Halacha backing him, he was aware that there would be tremendous backlash, which is why, as Ora said, he “separated the Halacha from the political immediately” when issuing his decision. When explaining his decision in a letter to the parents of the high school, this rabbi mentioned that another rabbi made a similar decision with regards to allowing a woman in his synagogue to pray while wearing tefillin. According to the letter, many of the men from that synagogue refused to continue attending services while there was a woman wearing tefillin. If there is clear halachic precedence for women wearing tefillin, and if these rabbis (people who are supposed to be able to make halachic decisions) say it is
okay for these women to wear *tefillin*, why is there such tremendous backlash about this particular *Halacha*?

I believe the answer lies in the subject of this chapter – the physicality of women wearing *tefillin* and *tallitot* goes against Modern Orthodox people’s notions of what a woman should look like, and therefore they take particular issue with this *mitzvah*. When speaking with Hannah about this issue, we spoke about the idea that putting on *tefillin* and *tallitot* are both positive time-bound *mitzvot*, and how this may be the reason behind people not wanting women to wear them. She said, “Positive time bound commandments, there are seven specifically that women are not obligated in…. And of those, five of them women are permitted to do, and no one has an issue with it, and the two are problematic are *tallit* and *tefillin*.” The reason people take such issue with only *tallit* and *tefillin* is, I argue, because of the physicality of the *mitzvot*. The other five *mitzvot* do not have to do with a woman’s body – they have to do with her saying something or hearing something or being somewhere, but they do not have to do with her putting something on her body. Lisa Steinberg has a very similar opinion to this. She said:

I think *tefillin* and *tallit*. Look, it’s such a funny thing…. Right, it falls into the category of women keeping *mitzvot* that they’re not obligated to, right. So, very few people object when a woman shakes a * lulav* [ritual palm branch] or when a woman goes to hear *shofar* [ram’s horn trumpet].

75 I think the whole issue of *tefillin* and *tallit*, and the reason that it’s become, like *Halachically*, it’s really not much more of a big deal than any of these other things, but because it is so physical, it grates on people’s sense of what women look like versus what men

75 Both hearing the *shofar* and shaking the *lulav* are positive time-bound *mitzvot* that Modern Orthodox women often take part in.
look like, and therefore it has become such a big thing, like there is a whole subtext here.

The “subtext” that Lisa mentioned is how the physicality of these particular mitzvot play into ideas of gender and gender conformity within the Modern Orthodox community.

It is important to recognize that a large part of the issue with women wearing tefillin and tallitot has nothing to do with the Halacha. It seems to have much more to do with women not looking like a man. Here I would like to address the idea that a woman looking like a man is threatening for the gender binary that is so important to Modern Orthodoxy. In her piece “Do Clothes Make the Woman?” Kath Weston writes about gender performance theory in relation to lesbians, particularly in butch/femme relationships. Within her analysis, she uses Judith Butler’s ideas of performance theory, saying, “According to Butler, gender is not a core identity or essence that precedes expression but rather a social construct created in the practice of relating to other people. As people perform gender, they orchestrate the play of gendered symbols upon and through the body’s surface to create an illusion of an interior reality” (Weston 1993:5). Weston goes on to critique certain aspects of performance theory, stating that it is inadequate to fully understand the gendered relationships of lesbians, but what is important here is Butler’s idea that through the body’s surface, people perform gender. In a Modern Orthodox context, men putting on tefillin and tallitot can be seen as an act of gender performance, and women performing such acts would therefore be taken as a threat to the gender binary that performativity can promote. In Butler’s own piece, “Critically Queer,” she writes that performativity is able to succeed when it “accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practice” Butler, 1993: 19). Butler’s argument is that performativity of gender must rely on a history
in which these acts have been gendered, and it is through this history that various aspects of
gender performance are crystalized in a society. This is perhaps why it is so important that
the idea of only men wearing **tefillin** and **tallitot** appears to go back to time immemorial,
when in fact it is only 500 years old. By making the origin of only men wearing **tefillin** and
**tallitot** seem as if it is much older than it is, Modern Orthodoxy is able to reify the notion that
there should be clear gender separation, a concept which is very important to the Modern
Orthodox community. It is so important, in fact, there is a **Halacha** that is specifically meant
to keep women from wearing men’s clothing, and vice versa. Deuteronomy 22:5 says, “A
woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a
woman's garment; for whosoever doeth these things is an abomination unto the Lord thy
God” (Mechon-Mamre). Clearly there is a large emphasis within Modern Orthodoxy of
keeping the two genders separate, and part of that involves keeping men and women looking
distinct from each other. That is why, as I have said, the idea of women wearing **tefillin** and
**tallitot** garners significantly more backlash than women partaking in other positive time-
bound mitzvot.

**Ideas of Tzniut: Why Women Are Expected to Dress Modestly**

In the previous section, I argued that women are not supposed to wear **tefillin** and
**tallitot** because that goes against the idea of what women in Modern Orthodoxy traditionally
look like. In this section I will look specifically at how women are expected to dress in
Modern Orthodoxy. Many of my informants brought up the idea of **tznuiut**, or modesty, when
speaking about how Modern Orthodox women are supposed to present themselves. Almost
all of my younger female informants, especially the ones who attended seminary in Israel,
had classes on “Women and Halacha,” and every one of these classes had a section on tzniut. Rebecca Seegar told me, “We had a women’s Halacha class [where] we learned tzniut [i.e., dressing modestly] and shomer negiah [not touching members of the opposite sex] and nidah [laws surrounding menstruation].” Rachel Beed told me about a similar class, in which she learned about tzniut. She said, “We learned about tzniut, which is like modesty, and all the Halachot pertaining to modesty and how you run a modest household.” Shira Barto told me about her sister, who, for her Bat-mitzvah, “chose to learn…. So she learned about the laws of being a woman, so like about modesty [in dress] and kol isha and other things of that nature.” Importantly, when speaking about modesty in terms of tzniut, all of these women were referring to how women dress. When I asked Rebecca what tzniut is, she responded, “Tzniut is dressing modestly, like wearing skirts, and covering your elbows and collarbone.” Clearly, in Modern Orthodoxy, the idea of tzniut is very much tied up in ideas of modesty, particularly in terms of clothing for women.

However, the source of the mitzvah of tzniut actually comes from Micah 6:8, where it says: “It hath been told thee, O man, what is good, and what the Lord doth require of thee: only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.” In most translations, the word “v’hetzne-ah,” which has the same root as the word tzniut, actually translates to humbly, not modesty, and there is no mention of women’s clothing choice anywhere. In the Talmud, the rabbis speak about certain aspects of a woman, including her thighs, hair, and voice as “ervah,” or sexually exciting to a man (Berachot 24a). Still, here there is no mention of a woman needing to cover herself up - it is simply saying that these

76 Literally translated, kol isha means “voice of a woman.” There is an idea in Modern Orthodoxy that a woman’s singing voice should not be heard, as it might not be modest and might be arousing to men who hear her.
77 The root of both words is “T.Z.N”
areas might be sexually attractive, the implication being that men should not look there. So it is just as likely that the onus should be on the man, and that he should look away, as it is that the woman should cover herself. Elsewhere in the Talmud, there is mention of Rachel (one of the mothers of Judaism) being rewarded for her modesty (Megillah 13b), but again it is not clear that her modesty came in the form of wearing modest clothing.

Given all of this, why is the idea of tzniut so heavily emphasized when it comes to women’s wardrobes? Here again I would like to bring in the idea that women are supposed to look a certain way – they are supposed to dress modestly, which, I believe, says something about how women are supposed to act and look within Modern Orthodoxy. The idea that women are supposed to, in some ways, act more modestly is reflected in the idea that they are not supposed to be rabbis, who are leaders of the community, and who are able to issue halachic decisions, and it is reflected in some people’s ideas that women in Modern Orthodoxy are supposed to inhabit the private, as opposed to the public, sphere of the community (i.e., the home). Women’s modesty also signals that they are not supposed to be sexually alluring or loose in any way, which again signifies women’s inability to choose how they would like to use their own bodies.

The various reasons for tzniut in terms of women’s clothing that my informants gave me reflects the idea that tzniut is meant to symbolize the visual, sexual, and perhaps moral modesty of the woman. When I asked Rebecca Seegar about the reason for tzniut, she said:

So like, in high school the [teachers] would always say it’s so you don’t turn men on. And I was always annoyed, because it’s like, why do I need to suffer because of men? But in [seminary], in my class, the way she phrased it was, it’s so you can reveal what you want to reveal when you want to reveal and to who you want
to reveal it. So, that made me appreciate more because it’s more something that is for you and for yourself, rather than like, to help men.

While at first the idea of women being able to reveal what they want and when they want it sounds liberating, when I asked Rebecca about this, she explained that this statement only applied within the confines of what was considered to be appropriate dress for women. So, more accurately, Modern Orthodox women were allowed to wear what they wanted, as long as it followed the tzniut dress code that Rebecca was taught. Through making it seem as though dressing modestly is something that women should want, there is an implication that Modern Orthodox woman should want to look modest, perhaps because they themselves are supposed to be modest.

Similarly, when I spoke to Rachel about her experience with learning about tzniut, she said:

In seminary…we learned about what tzniut really is, and that in fact it’s not about making the lives of men easier. It’s about how you want to portray yourself as a person…. It’s a way to show yourself to society as somebody who is respectable, as someone who is following Halacha, someone who is a representation of God and of Judaism.

Here again we see the idea that tzniut is connected with modesty, and it is through modesty that women are able to be seen as respectable.

Another important aspect of both Rebecca and Rachel’s comments, which I would like to briefly touch on, is something they both mentioned towards the beginning of their comments – how tzniut can be interpreted as having to do with not turning men on. Both Rachel and Rebecca hinted at the idea that they had previously learned this as a reasoning
behind tzniut, with Rebecca outright explaining that she was taught this in her high school, and Rachel stating that in seminary she learned what tzniut really is, and that in fact it does not have to do with not arousing men on (thus implying that this reasoning was something she had heard before). Importantly, neither Rachel nor Rebecca, nor any of my other informants, seemed to accept not arousing men as a reasonable source for why women should dress modestly, but the fact remains that this is a known idea within Modern Orthodoxy. In many ways, such a thought process objectifies women and animalizes men, and I do believe that the movement away from this train of thought is important. Still, the new reasoning behind tzniut, which seems to be that women should dress modestly because they want their appearance to reflect their nature, still suggests something about how women should be. It suggests that women should be modest people, which is something that is not expected of men, at least to the same extent that it is of women, within Modern Orthodoxy. This is particularly evident in the fact that, while tzniut laws for women are particularly well known and articulated within Modern Orthodoxy, ideas of tzniut for men are entirely absent. Rebecca said to me, “like, tzniut, men don’t have the same rules as us [women].” Similarly, when speaking with Adam Berkowitz, I specifically asked him if he knew of any laws pertaining to tzniut and men, and he said, “There definitely are laws for men for tzniut, that I could find for you, they’re not as focused as for women, but there definitely are.” However, when I asked him what these laws might be, he was unable to come up with an answer. The idea that Adam, a man, is more aware of the laws regarding women’s dress codes than men’s is particularly revealing, because it shows the lack of equality in terms of laws of how men and women are supposed to dress.
One could argue that dress codes in Modern Orthodox day schools exhibit equality, because the dress codes hold both boy’s and girl’s clothing to certain standards. However, while there are dress codes in place for both boys and girls who attend the schools, the reasoning behind the code is different. Hannah Berger explained it as follows: “In the schools the dress code rules kind of mask them in terms of this is our dress code, so we just want people to follow them, instead of this is a modesty issue [for girls].” The idea that Hannah was speaking about is that, dress codes for Modern Orthodox day schools tend to hold girls to varying forms of tzniut – in Aviva’s school, for example, the girls were only allowed to wear skirts. In Rachel’s school, girls’ shirts and skirts had to cover a certain amount of arm and leg, respectively, while the boy’s dress code required them to wear collared shirts and forbade them from wearing blue jeans, and required that they wear a kippah. While the girls in the school were expected to dress a certain way to dress modestly, the boys were expected to dress a certain way to present themselves respectfully. While both were subjected to dress codes, the reasoning behind the dress code is what is important, and, critically, the reasons for the two codes are not equal, and thereby further the gender binary within Modern Orthodoxy.

**Personal Feelings of Tzniut – People’s Own Modest Dress**

While all of my informants are well versed in the idea of tzniut (modesty), the ways in which they dress do not always reflect the standards of tzniut that people learn about. Recall that Rebecca mentioned that dressing according to tzniut meant wearing skirts, and wearing shirts that cover your elbows and collarbone. In addition to this, there is a practice in Modern Orthodoxy that women, once married, should cover their hair as a part of being
tzniut. Critically, while this standard of tzniut is one that is well known within Modern Orthodoxy, there are many alternate forms of tzniut. Some people believe that women don’t have to cover their collarbone; others believe that women’s shirts do not have to reach their elbows; and still others believe that women can wear pants. At Rachel’s high school, for example, the girls were required to wear skirts, but their shirts did not have to reach their collarbones, and short sleeves were acceptable. Still, girls were not allowed to wear shirts that were too low-cut, and while short sleeves were permitted, cap sleeves were not. Clearly, while there is variance within the confines of tzniut, there are still certain aspects of it that are relatively standard, and these standards exist to promote modesty.

However, while many of my informants showed up to our interviews in skirts and long-sleeved shirts that covered their color bone, others showed up in clothing that did not meet the typical standards. Rachel, for example, showed up to our meeting in a baggy t-shirt and leggings. During the course of our interview, she remarked:

I personally think I keep tzniut. Now, right now I am wearing leggings, so how am I keeping tzniut? I think there are varying degrees to which someone can keep tzniut. Now, obviously that is not in a halachic mindset, but like, nothing is exposed. I’m covered. I don’t feel uncomfortable walking out in public…. When I get dressed in the morning, I feel comfortable with myself, and I think that’s a [good] representation of Judaism…. I’m not gonna wear skirts all the way to the floor, I’m not gonna not wear tank tops in the summer.

Rachel is well aware of the traditional garb that goes along with the term tzniut – she alludes to that by saying that her way of keeping tzniut does not necessarily go along with the halachic mindset. Still, to Rachel, the main idea of tzniut is to present oneself in a way that
one feels comfortable, and in which one feels respectful. To her, tzniut is not only defined by the Halacha (which, bear in mind, seems to be rather unclear and vary widely between circles), but it is defined by the idea behind it – to dress in such a way that you do not feel uncovered. By taking this attitude towards tzniut, Rachel is able to still express herself in a way that she, but not necessarily the larger Modern Orthodox community, feels is modest.

Similarly, when I interviewed Rebecca, while she gave me a somewhat conservative definition of tzniut, immediately followed it up by saying, “but I don’t do that, and I also don’t know if I necessarily want to.” She told me that:

I think you should do it because it’s the Halacha. I understand the point of it but I don’t necessarily agree with all of it. Like I think some parts of it are kind of extreme. It’s extreme you need to cover your collarbone, but at the same time I understand that they need to set a boundary.

Clearly, Rebecca felt conflicted – on the one hand, believing that people should dress according to tzniut because it is the Halacha, and on the other hand, recognizing that the boundaries the Halacha set were too extreme for her. While she felt like she should follow the Halacha that she believed went along with tzniut, she was, like Rachel, adhering to her own ideas of tzniut, in that she felt as though she dressed modestly, even if she was wearing pants. Both Rebecca and Rachel are examples of people who feel as though they are dressing appropriately, even if they are not following what they believe to be the actual rules of tzniut.

Another approach to tzniut is demonstrated by Lisa, who is a married woman, and therefore covers her hair. During our interview, Lisa said to me:
I believe very strongly in *Halacha* and in the system of *Halacha*. That system comes along with some things that I don’t like, [but] I think it is a very worthwhile, you know, [and] I’m not gonna pick and choose. I feel very [long pause]. I cover my hair. I don’t like covering my hair. I don’t mind like accessorizing, I just don’t like the idea of covering my hair, but it is very much part of a system of how I live my life and I believe in the idea of that system. And so, this is sort of the ancillary stuff that comes along with it.

For Lisa, though she does not like the idea of covering her hair, critically because she does not like the reasoning behind it (having to be told what she is allowed to wear), she decides to cover her hair because it is a part of *Halacha*. She is choosing to submit to a system of laws that require her to do things that she does not like. Still, while she is participating in an aspect of the system that she does not support, it is vital to understand that she is still acting with agency.

Here I would like to bring in Saba Mahmood’s “Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival”, in which she explores women in a grassroots women’s Islamic piety movement in Egypt, who are actively choosing to learn more about, and become more immersed in, traditional Muslim culture. She writes, “They pursue practices and ideals embedded within a tradition that has historically accorded women a subordinate status, and seek to cultivate virtues that are associated with feminine passivity and submissiveness” (Mahmood 2001: 205). While these women are engaging in a culture that in some ways takes away some of their rights based on gender, they are doing so willingly, in an agentive manner. This idea is key – that women are able to act agentively while partaking in aspects of a culture that are not necessarily promoting gender equality. A
similar idea can be applied to Lisa’s actions – because she believes in the system of Halacha, and because Modern Orthodoxy is important to her, she is willing to actively take on aspects of the culture that she feels limit her rights in some ways.

However, even Lisa, who is choosing to submit to a halachic system that requires her to dress modestly, is not necessarily therefore submitting to an inherently patriarchal system. Recall Hannah, who, when I asked her about the mehitza (divider between men and women in synagogue), gave an explanation that almost entirely took gender out of the equation. With regards to tzniut, while it is currently formed in a way that does seem to restrict men more than women, this does not necessarily have to be the case. Tzniut could be looked at again in its original context – in Micah 6:8, which states that people should walk humbly with God. Even if this is interpreted as having to do with dress, if men were also expected to adhere to the same modesty regulations as women, then this aspect of Modern Orthodoxy could feasibly foster equality amongst men and women. However, as long as the standards of tzniut remain as they are, implicitly stating the importance of women’s modesty, without doing the same for men, remains impossibly difficult for Modern Orthodox feminists to achieve their goal of gender equality.

As long as men and women are held to different standards of how they are expected to look – women dressing modestly, not wearing tefillin (phylacteries) or tallitot (prayer shawls), and not being or appearing as rabbis – appearances will continue to perpetuate the gender binary that exists within Modern Orthodoxy. This, perhaps, is part of the reason some Modern Orthodox people are so against changing the current standards of what people are expected to wear – they are against changing the gender binary as it currently stands. When I asked Lisa if she thought part of the issue people have with women wearing tefillin and
*tallitot* has to do with keeping men and women’s roles separate in Modern Orthodoxy, she responded, “Oh, for sure. It’s threatening [to change those things].” The reason it is so threatening, as I have argued above, is that many to some extent enjoy and expect that men and women have separate roles. If the idea of what men and women should *look like* begins to shift and perhaps get muddled, then ideas about the roles that men and women should hold might also become less distinct. It would, perhaps, become even less common for people to regard a rabbi as necessarily male. People within Modern Orthodoxy therefore work to maintain the gender binary through gender performativity, using profound expectations regarding appearances to keep a gender binary going.
Women and Personhood: Women’s Right to Control Their Own Lives

A Brief Introduction

This chapter of my thesis will focus primarily on women’s role, or lack thereof, in divorce proceedings within Modern Orthodoxy. Unlike all of my other chapters, in which I tried to explore the opinions of as many informants as possible, this chapter will mostly focus on the statements of two women – Hannah Berger and Nancy Bloom. The reason for this is that they are the only two who felt it necessary to bring up issues of divorce in Modern Orthodoxy. They are also the only two of my informants who are divorced. I believe it is particularly telling that of all of my informants, the only two who felt it necessary to bring up divorce as a women’s rights issue are themselves divorcees.78 While we were speaking about women’s rights in Modern Orthodoxy, Hannah specifically said, “I do have to call out, though, the place where [the lack of rights is] most devastating, [and that] is with respect to marriage and ending a marriage, which impacts fewer people, but it is so much more outrageous really.” To Hannah, the issue of divorce in Modern Orthodoxy is one of the most important issues for women, although very few of my other informants felt the need to bring
it up. This probably has something to do with the relatively low number of Modern Orthodox women who have to deal with divorce proceedings, and the fact that a good portion of my participants were in their late teens or early twenties, too young to have been directly involved with divorce.

One of the reasons divorce proceedings can be argued to be such an important women’s rights issue, however, is because—according to Halacha (Jewish law)—it is the husband who must terminate the marriage. If a husband chooses to not grant his wife a divorce there is very little she can do, and she retains the status of a married woman, meaning that she is, in many ways, unable to move on with her life. The lack of actions available to women in this position highlights an important part of Halachic proceedings— that women, in some instances, are unable to dictate the outcome of their own lives. Often times in Modern Orthodoxy, divorce proceedings must go through a beit din, or Jewish court of law. Importantly, women’s lack of ability to dictate parts of their lives can be seen in the beit din as well, because the beit din is composed of three rabbis, who, in Modern Orthodoxy, must be male, and, according to Halacha, witnesses must be male as well. Here again, women are not granted the same abilities as men in areas of Jewish life that could profoundly impact women’s lives. In this chapter, I will specifically focus on how divorce proceedings in Modern Orthodoxy limit women’s capacity to control their own lives, and how the lack of women’s role in the beit din impacts women’s agency as well. I will also use Hannah and Nancy’s feelings to illustrate why women’s lack of role in divorce proceedings and beit din cases is such a big issue in Modern Orthodoxy, and to understand how the people in the feminist movement within Modern Orthodoxy work to combat these issues.
Deuteronomy 24:1 proclaims “When a man taketh a wife, and marrieth her, then it cometh to pass, if she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some unseemly thing in her, that he writeth her a bill of divorcement, and giveth it in her hand, and sendeth her out of his house” (Mechon-Mamre). Because of the language of this passage – the man gives his wife the divorce document, or get – Halacha dictates that it must be the man who initiates the divorce. This does not mean that women are not allowed to request a divorce from their husband, but rather that the husband must initiate the action for the actual divorce. He must divorce her, not the other way around. Throughout the Gemara (Jewish text of Rabbinical debates and decisions) that deals primarily with issues of divorce, tractate Gittin, it is assumed that it is the man that gives his wife a divorce, because of the verse in Deuteronomy. Suffice to say, it is very clear throughout various forms of Halachic writings that it is the man who must take action in divorce proceedings, and this is something that both Hannah and Nancy brought up. Hannah said to me, “The way the divorce law works in Judaism is that the man has to give the divorce to the woman [and not the other way around].” Similarly, Nancy said, “Well, the Halachic issue is that the Halacha as it currently exists says that only a man can initiate a divorce or I guess only a man can give a divorce.”

The reason it is so problematic that women are unable to initiate a divorce is there are times when a man might choose to not give his wife a divorce. According to Hannah:

If he does not give it [a get] to her, she remains, the word that’s used is chained, she remains chained to him. And so there are ways for him to go off and remarry, and you know have a new life, while she is unable to be released from him. And if she were to have children they would be considered a technical term called a
*mamzer* [bastard], which would have kind of devastating impact on her and her children.

Essentially, because men are technically allowed to have more than one wife, they are able to refuse to give their wife a *get* without huge implications for their future. However, if a married woman commits adultery, according to the Bible it is considered a capital sin, as it is one of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:12). It is clear that adultery is only considered to considered a capital sin if a married woman is involved, as the Leviticus 20:10 says, “And the man that committeth adultery with another man's wife, even he that committeth adultery with his neighbour's wife, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death” (Mechon-Mamre). The passage specifically mentions “another man’s wife,” but nowhere does the Bible speak about a woman committing adultery with “another woman’s husband.”

The act of committing adultery is considered to be such an unforgivable sin that it is considered to be one of three sins that one must give one’s life for,79 (Sanhedrin 74a). Because of the way adultery is defined (which a separated wife would technically be committing if she had relations with another man without having obtained a *get*), the wife, and only the wife, is unable to get remarried or even have relations with another man. Due to the nature of the wife’s status – being unable to move on from the marriage – the word that is used to describe a woman in this position is *agunah*, which, as Hannah said, means “chained wife.”

When speaking to Nancy about this, she also mentioned that these chained women, or *agunot* (plural of *agunah*) are “unable to remarry or get on with their lives.” We had the following conversation:

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79 The actual sin specified in the Talmud is not committing relationships of incest, which adultery is considered to be a part of. The other two sins are idol worship and murder.
KB: So what happens if a man doesn’t give his wife a divorce? What happens to that woman?

NB: She’s basically stuck in the status of a married woman. And she is called an agunah because she is considered chained to the marriage and to her husband.

KB: Is there anything she can do?

NB: [jokingly] Yeah, she can hire somebody to beat the shit out of the guy.

The wording that is used by Nancy, calling the woman “stuck,” and the actual meaning of the word agunah – that this woman is chained to her husband – speaks to the devastating impact that this status can have on a woman. Because her husband has refused to give her a divorce, she is unable to do what she wants with her life. Thankfully, when divorces do occur in Modern Orthodoxy, the majority of husbands seem to be willing to give their wives gettim (plural of get), and therefore the issue of agunot (plural of agunah) is fairly uncommon, but even in divorces where everything runs smoothly, the woman’s future status rests solely in the hands of a man. When speaking about her own divorce, Nancy said, “actually, despite the fact that my ex-husband and I disagreed on almost everything, and he was a control freak, I think he had some sense of person honor and did not want to be one of those guys who was a ‘get refuser.’” Clearly, the issue of divorce in Modern Orthodoxy seems to be an area where women lack control over their own personhood, unable to make their own decisions regarding their lives.

While I do not know personally any agunot, their stories are easily found on multiple Jewish news sites, and also occasionally make an appearance in the secular news as well. I will recount a few of these stories here. In The Jewish Week there was an article about a woman who had been separated, but not divorced, from her husband for 12 years. He was so
against not giving her a get that he chose to spend the last six of those years in jail, meaning there is nothing else this woman can do. Until this man chooses to give her a get, which seems unlikely to happen, she remains chained to him. In a similar case that occurred in Brooklyn, a woman is seeking a get from her husband, because she said, as quoted in the article, “[The get] enables me to move on with my life instead of being stuck and chained as I am now…. [Without it] I can’t get remarried. I can’t date. I don’t have that hope for the future of the family I always wanted” (Sutherland, 2015). In this particular case, the woman was physically and emotionally abused during the marriage, though because her husband was not giving her a get, she remained chained to him, a person who, according to her, “would punch her in the stomach when she was pregnant.” Because of the way the get works, it was he, not she, who had control over what she would be able to do in the future.

**Women’s Inability to Bear Witness in Court: Potential Problems and Implications**

Unlike divorce proceedings, where the role of men versus women is very clearly stated, gender role differences are less explicit in the Bible when it comes to witnesses in a bein din (Jewish court of law). However, when speaking about witnesses, the Bible consistently uses the male pronoun. In Leviticus 5:1, it is written, “And if any one sin, in that he heareth the voice of adjuration, he being a witness, whether he hath seen or known, if he do not utter it, then he shall bear his iniquity” (Mechon-Mamre). From this the Talmud derives that witnesses cannot be women, saying, “Eidut [witnessing] is applied to men, not to women” (Shavuot 30a). Therefore, as the beit din is required to follow the Halacha that is written in the Talmud, female witnesses are not allowed to act as witnesses in court.  

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80 There are some exceptions to this rule, where women are allowed to serve as witnesses in certain court cases, particularly involving women’s purity laws.
Conservative Judaism, while it values the rabbinic decisions in the Talmud, seems to hold a more lenient view regarding female witnesses, with some prominent Conservative rabbis declaring that women should be able to act as witnesses in all court cases. In his essay “Edut Nashim K’Edut Anashim: The Testimony of Women is as the Testimony of Men: A Concurring Opinion,” Rabbi Aaron Mackler, a Conservative rabbi, explained why he believed that women should be considered valid witnesses in all cases that may come to a beit din. He explains, “the vast majority of Orthodox rabbis, and some Conservative rabbis, do not accept the legitimacy of women serving as witnesses” (2004: 2).

Though the basis of this Halacha is somewhat less clear than that of women’s role in divorce, importantly it is still well known within Modern Orthodoxy that women are unable to act as witnesses. Nancy explained to me that, in a beit din, “Only men’s testimony is considered valid for the purpose of being a witness on Halachic issues.” Hannah, too, mentioned that “Women can’t be witnesses in most cases, there are only a few exceptions to that.” Nancy said to me that the Halacha against having female witnesses “clearly demeans the judgment and decision making capacities of women.”

Here again there is a Halacha that, in some way, invalidates a woman’s ability to give input in potentially very important cases. The fact that women cannot give testimony undermines their ability to have their voices heard, especially because the people who sit on the beit din are rabbis, which, in Modern Orthodoxy, means they must be men. All of this becomes particularly important because one of the issues that is most often brought to a bein din are gettim (divorces), which, as I discussed earlier, women already do not have much authority in. Therefore, not only is a woman’s decision making demeaned through the court

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81 Importantly, however, not all Conservative rabbis agree with this view.
82 See above footnote.
not allowing them to testify, but a secondary problem that arises is that women are less able to impact issues of divorce and agunot (women who are “chained” to their husbands), which is a particularly female issue. Rabbi Mackler explains that one of the reasons he supports female witnesses is that, if a woman had witnesses a man giving his wife a get, and there is no other proof of the get, it is as if the man did not divorce his wife. He explains, “An individual whose get is witnessed by a woman will find that some Conservative rabbis, and virtually all Orthodox rabbis, will not recognize the validity of the document and so would refuse to officiate at a remarriage” (Mackler 2004: 2). Women’s inability to serve as witnesses in matters that could potentially save women from being labeled agunot demonstrates the lack of agency women within Modern Orthodoxy have, especially concerning matters that generally have a greater impact on women.

**What Can Be Done: A Feminist Response**

Both Nancy and Hannah felt strongly about the issue of agunot (women who are “chained” to their husbands), and both were clearly particularly troubled by this issue. One of the reasons that they had such an issue with agunot in particular is that it seems particularly difficult to get around the halachot concerning divorce. Hannah said, “The laws…divorce, I don’t think the laws as they exist will change,” and Nancy offered a similar sentiment. However, while both women did not think that the laws concerning divorce would change, both had hope that there would be loopholes found within the existing laws to lessen the issue of agunot. When I asked Nancy if she knew of any loophole that currently existed, she said:
Prospectively [the couple] can have a prenuptial agreement that is enforceable in a civil court, which…can take the form of the guy agreeing contractually that if she asks for a divorce he’ll give her one, and it imposes a financial penalty if he doesn’t give her a divorce after she’s asked for it.

Hannah also mentioned these prenuptial agreements, but specified that they are not universally used.

Nancy also said:

I think, if people wanted to sort of maintain a fiction of a man initiating a divorce, but rabbis wanted to empower women, there are ways that they could find to invalidate the marriages of women who wanted divorces who wanted gets. And some rabbis are working to do that…but a lot of others, like I said, are very conservative when it comes to these kinds of personal status issues.

Importantly, Nancy believes that there may be a way within the confines of Halacha to give women more status and power when it comes to issues of divorce. However, she qualifies that this will only work if the people in charge of issuing rulings based on Halacha are willing to give women this power. Both Hannah and Nancy very strongly feel that, if the rabbis wanted to give women more power in these situations, they would find a way to do so. Therefore, while they both believe that the issue of agunot is clearly devastating, it might not have to be, if people were motivated enough to find a way around it.

**Concluding Thoughts: How Divorce Impacts the Agency of Women**

Earlier on in my thesis I made the argument that women will not always choose to advocate for “women’s rights” in terms of gender equality, even when they are given the
chance to act with agency. They might, for example, purposefully choose to adhere to *Halachot* (Jewish laws) that put them in a separate sphere than their male counterparts, and as a consequence of this can be seen as losing some of their rights. However, what is crucial about the idea that women can act with agency while choosing to adhere to laws which keep them subordinate to men is that it can still be considered a feminist action because the women are able to act with agency, that is a sense of motivated, purposeful action. What is important to notice about the issue of divorce in Modern Orthodoxy is that women are explicitly denied agency. If a woman’s husband decides to not give her a *get*, then she is chained to the marriage, and is unable to do anything about it.

This denial of agency, in my opinion, speaks to the personhood women have, or perhaps lack, within the Modern Orthodox community. The women who are considered to be *agunot* (chained wives) are tremendously affected by their lack of full, free personhood. They are essentially stuck, unable to control their own lives, because men *have* to initiate the *get* (divorce document) in order for the divorce to be valid. This profound lack of personhood within the marriage cycle very much highlights, perhaps even more than other aspects of women’s rights and roles that I have spoken about, the importance of the gender disparities within the Modern Orthodox communities, because this is an issue of agency regarding the rest of one’s life.
Conclusion

When I began this study, I was very much looking forward to learning about how Modern Orthodox men and women navigate their feminist beliefs while still adhering to Halacha (Jewish law). As I mentioned in the Prologue, this topic has a particular interest to me because, at some point, I myself was a Modern Orthodox feminist. I left Modern Orthodoxy in part because I felt that the two beliefs – Modern Orthodoxy and feminism – could not be reconciled, and I felt more strongly about women’s rights than strict observance of Halacha. Because I did grow up Modern Orthodox, I approached this project from an interesting dual-perspective, as both a former native, with an emic or insider’s point of view, and an anthropologist, who was seeking as an outside analyst to learn about how others deal with seemingly opposing viewpoints. Through my “anthropologist lens,” I have attempted to understand and learn from people who self identify simultaneously as Modern Orthodox and feminist, and have tried to convey their thoughts on how they navigate these two aspects of their lives. However, since I also have a “native’s perspective,” I have, at times been willing to critique certain aspects of the Modern Orthodox culture, in order to bring into the realm of discussion the possibility of change regarding women’s roles. While I have done this, I have attempted to in no way undermine the importance or validity of the feelings and perspectives of my interviewees, who, consciously or not, continue to navigate their feminist and Modern Orthodox ideals.

Throughout this project, I was able to learn about various ways in which some people do in fact reconcile their two, apparently contradictory, beliefs through reappraisal and through advocacy for women’s rights within the confines of Halacha. I also spoke to
multiple men and women who do not try to reconcile these beliefs, and who are perfectly fine with that. I have learned that there are ways in which people are able to abide by, and find importance in, two belief systems that I had long ago written off as inherently contradictory.

Throughout the past six chapters, I have examined various aspects of Modern Orthodoxy in terms of how both the Halacha and the societal structure influence views of women’s roles within the community. What I have discovered is that although all of my participants all self-identified as believing in gender equality, their approach to women’s issues within Modern Orthodoxy varied greatly, across both people and issues. Some are comfortable within the Modern Orthodoxy they know, and therefore do not wish to disrupt the status quo – they accept women’s roles as they currently exist because they enjoy practicing Modern Orthodoxy in its current form. Others push for change within the confines of Halacha, arguing that women should be able to become rabbis and lead parts of prayer services.

Some of these changes are already occurring within left-wing fringes of the Modern Orthodox movement, as in some synagogues where both women and men lead services. Other changes seem to be a possibility, but have not yet occurred, such as having female rabbis. The question is, will people continue to push for these changes? Will changes continue to occur? In short, will the feminist ideals from the secular world – that women and men should have equal opportunities and rights – continue to influence the way Modern Orthodoxy is run in the future?

A crucial part of answering these questions is the differences of opinions between my older participants and my younger ones. In general, it was the older participants who were keener on seeing change in women’s abilities and rights within Modern Orthodoxy. More
often than not, they were the ones attending partnership *minyanim* (services in which both men and women lead), the ones advocating for female rabbis, and the ones who had a better understanding of the *Halachot* regarding women’s rights. In contrast to this, younger participants generally felt less comfortable with ideas of Modern Orthodoxy that did not align with its current model. Many, though critically not all, of them were less eager to advocate for partnership *minyanim* or female rabbis, because it was contrary to what they were comfortable with. In a similar vein, most of my younger participants were less aware of the *Halachot* involving women’s rights, and instead were influenced through social norms about what women could not do, which they then often attributed to *Halacha*. Perhaps, if gender equality within Modern Orthodoxy is something that people wish to strive for, an important first step to take would be the education of women on what *Halachot* say about women’s rights.

One might assume that Modern Orthodox people would want to look carefully at how *Halacha* can and cannot integrate certain “modern” values, as the interaction of the two is a key tenet of Modern Orthodoxy. However, this premise overlooks the influence that tradition and societal norms have in terms of how Modern Orthodoxy actually plays out. Oftentimes people learn about the *Halachic* system, and along with a few key *Halachot*, but, like many of my younger participants, generally rely on norms that surround them to fill in the gaps in their knowledge. The societal norms that exist within Modern Orthodoxy are often based on traditions and values that are believed to have existed hundreds of years ago, not modern secular norms. Therefore ideas of what a rabbi should be, which, as Shira Barto pointed out to me, remain attached to what a rabbi would have been a hundred years ago, when women’s equality was much less heard of within Judaism. Many of my participants
spoke about “comfort” – they seem to be “comfortable” with these traditional roles, and therefore do not feel as though they want modern society to influence women’s roles.

Recall, if you will, that in the first chapter I mentioned that the people I interviewed generally see Modern Orthodoxy not as two separate spheres, but as an integrated whole. However, oftentimes people, perhaps unknowingly, do separate the religious “Orthodoxy sphere” from the secular “Modern” one, so the values that are important for them in one sphere (such as gender equality) are less important in the other. This was particularly true for my younger participants, who again were more supportive of women’s rights within the secular realm, but more hesitant in the religious realm. Many times, when my younger participants were uncertain about increasing women’s rights within Modern Orthodoxy, they attributed it to various “assumed Halachot,” which I suggested may be a way for them to deal with the cognitive dissonance that comes along with holding two contradictory beliefs at the same time.83 My younger participants often explained that, while they may want increased rights for women, they must abide by the Halachot, which do not allow for these rights, and therefore they do not strive towards women’s rights within Modern Orthodoxy. However, many of my older participants were aware that they held conflicting beliefs, and they were okay with this tension. Lisa Steinberg, for example, who strongly believes in both women’s rights and Modern Orthodoxy, is aware of, but not necessarily uncomfortable with, the tension that exists between her beliefs, because she recognizes that both are important, and at times one must come before the other. This is another way in which people deal with cognitive dissonance – by accepting that it is not necessarily problematic two hold two contradictory beliefs. This manifests itself through Lisa’s participation in partnership

83 In this case, believing in gender equality while not wishing to have women in certain positions that men have traditionally held.
minyanim, while still covering her hair in order to respect the Halachot of tzniut (modesty). Perhaps another step in the direction of women’s rights in Modern Orthodoxy is willingness to accept that different aspects of one’s beliefs may not always complement each other, and understanding that this is not necessarily problematic.

Perhaps the most important aspect of whether or not feminism will continue to be a movement within Modern Orthodoxy pertains to people’s views of how the two interact. John Lecker made a point to say, “One thing that is important is that feminism is a basic Modern Orthodox value.” To John the fight for women’s rights is a necessary aspect of Modern Orthodoxy, because Modern Orthodoxy to him means drawing from secular culture to enhance one’s connection with God and Judaism. On the other hand, Sharon Weiss believes that, “There is a disparity between Modern Orthodoxy and feminism, and there’s really no way to reconcile that gap.” To Sharon, due to women’s inability to occupy the same positions as men in Modern Orthodoxy, it is almost impossible to believe in both feminism and Modern Orthodoxy. She feels that these two belief systems are inherently contradictory, because the values of the two do not line up.

These two contrasting ways of viewing Modern Orthodoxy’s relationship with feminism may hold within them the answer to whether or not Modern Orthodox feminism will continue to exist. If more Modern Orthodox people come to feel, as John does, that feminism is a basic Modern Orthodox value, then they will continue to push for women’s rights within the confines of Halacha. However, if people feel that Modern Orthodoxy and feminism cannot be reconciled, perhaps those fighting for women’s rights will drift more towards the Conservative movement, leaving Modern Orthodoxy behind. It is also important to recognize that sects of Judaism are themselves fluid, and the Modern Orthodox movement
only started in the nineteenth century. Perhaps Modern Orthodoxy, which encompasses a wide array of ideas, will become divided into those who wish to preserve the more conservative gender roles and those who continue to push for women’s rights.

Through looking at the intersections and contradictions between feminism and Modern Orthodoxy, I have gained a deeper insight into how gender conformity and gender binaries are created, sustained, and resisted within Modern Orthodoxy. I have realized how important ideas of gender are within Modern Orthodoxy, though this is not necessarily broadly recognized throughout the community. I have also come to have a greater appreciation for the ways in which people simultaneously pursue Modern Orthodoxy and feminism, two ideologies which I originally thought to be irreconcilable. Despite my own personal reluctance, in some respects, I have thus come to realize that feminists need not necessarily be full advocates for gender equality in all spheres, and that it can be perfectly normal and widespread for people to hold internally inconsistent beliefs. However, I still hope to see that the women’s movement will maintain a central and influential role within Modern Orthodox Judaism.
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