

Fuchs, Ilan. *Jewish Women's Torah Study: Orthodox Religious Education and Modernity*. Routledge Jewish Studies Series. NYC, New York: Routledge, 2014.

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Jewish Women's Torah Study is an overview of Jewish Orthodox attitudes to women's study of Torah. The book has a broad chronological and geographical sweep, though its main focus is on the past century, in which the changes in modernity – including new laws making education compulsory in European states, the spread of the *Haskalah*, an increasingly porous boundary to the Jewish community and the establishment of ideological ultra-Orthodoxy – precipitated a revolution in the access of Orthodox women to Torah study. Social historical details are offered throughout, especially through the large number of mini-biographies of the book's main protagonists, but bulk of the book is an intellectual history of Halakhic debates within Orthodox society, almost exclusively among male rabbis, regarding the question of the permissibility of, and the limits to, the study of Torah by Jewish women.

The stakes here are high, because the study of Torah in Orthodox society was – and remains – not only a utilitarian pursuit but also a question of access to the knowledge that is the basis for social power. The issue of gender is particularly loaded in a society that believes that the difference between men and women is ontological. “The difference between men and women is not the result of historical or cultural context but a immutable law of nature dictated by God?” (5) It is perhaps not a surprise then that the question of the study of Torah for women was a major engine of change in modern Orthodox history. Along with the question of Zionism, the issue of support or opposition to women's education in Torah was one of the main fault lines along which different groups in Orthodox society arrayed themselves. Agudas Israel, one of ultra-Orthodoxies most prominent political bodies, was perhaps formed in order to organize limited support for such education. (34)

Chapter one surveys the rabbinic material, from the rabbinic period through to the end of the Middle Ages that placed limits on Torah study by women. Fuchs rightly points out that although there were many women in Jewish history that studied Torah and were recognized and honored for doing so, they remained exceptions before the modern period. They were often, in the words of Ada Rapoport-Albert in her discussion of the female Hasidic teacher Hana Rahel Verbermakher, (“The Maiden of Ludmir,”) “false male[s].” (10) It was only with modernity that Orthodox rabbis began to consider the propriety of the study of Torah for females as a group.

The most significant watershed in the access of women to the study of Torah was the establishment, after the First World War, of Beis Yaakov, a system of women's schools. Sarah Schenirer, a Polish tailor from a rabbinical family, established Beis Yaakov. Chapters two and three deal with Orthodox responses to the schools in Eastern and Central Europe, Palestine and Israel. These are followed by chapters discussing the response of American rabbis, Chabad and Satmar Hasidism, and “Moderate Orthodoxy” in America and Israel, to the new phenomenon of women's Torah study.

Two themes recur throughout the book. The first is the apparent connection in the Orthodox rabbinic mind between women's Torah study and sexuality. In the earliest rabbinical sources, one opinion held that teaching Torah to women is like teaching them *tiflut*. In one strand of interpretation, this word is related to sexual activity, or the cunningness required to conceal immoral sexual acts. Opposition to women's Torah study was consistently linked to this theme. According to Fuchs, those opposed to Beis Yaakov saw “women as irrevocably impure, and thus ontologically incapable of approaching the holiness of Torah. Impurity is inhering to the female body and its reproductive cycle.” (84) The opposition of Satmar Hasidism to women's Torah education derived primarily from the “direct causality between knowledge and promiscuity.” (183) (By contrast, and more inspiringly, one of the earliest supporters of Beis Yaakov believed that education in Torah would help to save women from human trafficking in the Jewish community. (43)

The second recurring theme is that even the Orthodox supporters of women's Torah education considered it to be a tool of (male) social control of women. Although women's education in general terms can be seen as a means for social mobility, Torah education in the Orthodox world was considered by most of its supporters as a way to preserve the status quo. The earliest supporters of Beis Yaakov considered it to be necessary as a tool to prevent women, who were increasingly exposed to secular education, from leaving the Orthodox community. The foundational rabbinical text in support of Beis Yaakov, written by Israel Meir Ha-kohen (author of the *Hafetz Hayim*) permitted women to study Torah "because if not, they might leave the path of God completely and commit sins against the foundations of our faith, God forbid." (35) Another talked of the "thousands of souls of daughters of Israel have been saved by these schools." (53) Given that this – rather than notions of gender equality or the religious value of Torah study – motivated support for Beis Yaakov, it is not surprising that these supporters also insisted on a radical limitation to the curriculum of the schools. The study of Talmud in particular was forbidden or severely curtailed.

As ultra-Orthodox society developed, the use of education as a tool of social control of women became even more pronounced. From the nineteenth century, the dynamics of ultra-Orthodox society began to change. For the first time, men were encouraged to leave the work force *en masse* and to devote themselves to the full-time study of Torah. Women's labor was required to support this endeavor, for women were increasingly called upon to be the sole source of income for ultra-Orthodox families, while also being exclusively responsible for raising families and running the household. Beis Yaakov schools were designed to produce women with the "ideological stamina" (94) required to acquiesce to this new social structure. According to Fuchs, "Beis Yaakov schools had a clear goal: creating a new kind of Jewish woman, ready to live a life of poverty and to support a husband in full-time study." (64) And despite the newly increased importance of the study of Torah in ultra-Orthodox society, women's Torah education did not offer them any access to the power of Torah knowledge, for they were systematically excluded from the study of Talmud and exposed only to areas of knowledge required for the fulfillment of their duties.

Not all of Orthodoxy can be characterized in this way. Fuchs writes that what he calls “Moderate Orthodoxy” is distinguished from ultra-Orthodoxy in that it accepts women’s study of Torah as an independent value, has, (at least from the later twentieth century,) a more nuanced view of feminism, and makes its ideological biases explicit rather than concealed. (217-8) This is certainly true of many of the thinkers discussed in the book, for example Hayim Hirschensohn, who served in Hoboken NJ in the early twentieth century, or Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, under whose auspices women’s Torah education became far more substantive, the curriculum being expanded to include Talmudic study also. The same can also be said of several of the Israeli rabbis discussed in the book’s final chapter. Even here, however, more conservative views of the ontological distinction between the genders were the rule rather than the exception. In 1968, Moshe Zvi Neriah, a Zionist rabbi, wrote that the goal of the women’s school that he had established was “to encourage women to remain at home rather than enter the job market.” (194) Moshe Feinstein who was in general supportive of women’s study of Torah was suspicious of “foreign spirits” like feminism. And, as late as the 1990s, even many “Moderate Orthodox” rabbis believed that “feminism is a cause for disqualification” for women interested in the study of Torah. (207)

The nature of the book, with its focus on Halakhic literature written by men, means that the male anxiety regarding traditional gender roles are at the center of its narrative. The book does not offer an account of the female agents in this history and their role in the social revolution of introducing Torah study to women. Nor does it engage with Torah scholarship by women; only a few lines in the book discuss it. These are matters that Dr. Fuchs might discuss in future scholarship. In the meantime, this book is a valuable resource for those interested in the details and variety of Halakhic material dealing with one most defining and enduring debates for Orthodox Judaism in modernity.