Spirituality, Textual Study and Gender at Nishmat: A Spirited Chavruta

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Abstract

Based on ethnographic research with Jewish women participating in the summer program at Nishmat: The Jerusalem Center for Advanced Jewish Study for Women, this paper explores religion, spirituality, gender and feminism as a conceptual cluster of highly contested and contingent terms. This project explores the attitudes and motivations of a unique group of Jewish women as an opportunity to disrupt received oppositions between religion and spirituality and to think critically about the ways that feminism, and particularly Jewish feminism, plays out in Jewish women’s self-understanding as gendered, spiritual, and/or religious persons.

This project explores the attitudes and motivations of a unique group of Jewish women as an opportunity to disrupt received oppositions between religion and spirituality and to think critically about the ways that feminism, and particularly Jewish feminism, plays out in this group of Jewish women’s self-understanding as gendered, spiritual, and/or religious persons. Based on ethnographic research with Jewish women participating in the 2007 summer program at Nishmat: The Jerusalem Center for Advanced Jewish Study for Women, this paper explores religion, spirituality, gender and feminism as a conceptual cluster of highly contested and contingent terms.

Nishmat: Tradition, and Women’s Textual Study

Nishmat is housed in a unique residential campus situated in the Pat neighbourhood of Jerusalem. Working within and, for the most part, with the approval of the broadly construed communal and religious frameworks of Orthodox Judaism, its programs focus on three major areas: text-based Jewish studies programs such as the summer program during which this research was conducted, the education of women in the area of taharat hamishpacha (family purity) for the purposes of training communal educators and halakhic (Jewish law) advisors, and thirdly, the religious training and socialization of Ethiopian women within Israeli society.¹

The focus of the summer program is on textual literacy and skill development with classes at beginner to advanced levels in Torah, Talmud, Halakha, and Jewish Thought. In addition to core classes the program also includes Hebrew language training, additional lectures...
on women and Judaism issues given by the Dean and founder, Rabbani Chana Henkin, daily seminars on halakhic questions, coordinated Shabbat meals with local families, as well as organized excursions that emphasize religious Zionist activities and destinations.

The summer program at Nishmat takes part in what has been described as the “quiet revolution” that has been taking place among modern Orthodox women over the last three decades—namely the development of institutions and programs that specialize in intensive Jewish Studies training for women and which in turn offer women opportunities to develop a level of religious literacy that had traditionally been available only to men. Characteristically, these women’s programs, like the male yeshivot (academies for the study of Torah and Talmud) upon which they are modeled, are centred on a Beit Midrash. The Beit Midrash is literally a study hall where students learn together in chavruta with access to a full range of rabbinic texts and exegetical resources. Students meticulously work through texts together, translating and analysing each word choice and phrase in connection with other relevant sources and commentaries. Advocates argue that learning in this way promotes “an unmediated relationship to text and an active rather than a passive relationship to study and prayer.” It is that active relationship to study, with its implications for women’s roles in the elaboration of halakhic interpretation, which is so significant against the backdrop of the history of women’s religious education.

It is important to place this program in context. There is a long-standing debate in the Orthodox community that questions whether it is advisable or even permissible to educate Jewish women in Torah and Talmud study. The implications of this question are far reaching. Since the tenth century, Jewish men have studied Torah and Talmud together in the yeshiva. The yeshiva is not only a key institution for training men in proper Jewish observance; it also socializes Jewish men, and, through the skills and expertise garnered there, confers spiritual, cultural and social authority and status. Most importantly, halakhic expertise gained through the study of Torah and Talmud is the only entrée into the continuing formation of halakha. In the Ultra-Orthodox or Haredi world, the yeshiva is still the normative path for male education. For the Orthodox world in general it is still the framework of halakhic discourse. Women’s historical
exclusion from Torah and Talmud study has necessarily kept women at the margins of this centre of Jewish life and has made it virtually impossible to participate in the halakhic process.

The central question of women’s education hinges on the Talmudic argument between Ben Azzai, who claims a father must teach his daughter Torah, and Rabbi Eliezar who determines in a Mishna on Sotah “Anyone who teaches his daughter Torah [it is as if] he is teaching her tiflut” (Sotah 20a). The interpretation of tiflut is key. Rashi interprets tiflut as immorality (Sotah 21b), while Maimonides interprets tiflut as triviality. According to Rashi’s interpretation, Rabbi Eliezer is worrying that “women with improper spiritual motives would study the Torah and use its knowledge to undermine and violate its precepts.”7 Alternately, Maimonides argues that although women can study Torah, and indeed would be recompensed (albeit less than men since men are commanded and women are not), teaching women in general is still not advised. Maimonides reads Rabbi Eliezer as warning that women as a group lack the intellectual capacity and particular skills for studying Torah and as such, will trivialize the Torah. Maimonides also distinguishes between Oral Torah and Written Torah. The proof-text applies only to the Oral Torah; although women should not be instructed in Written Torah; if they are, it is not as though they are taught triviality. In this view, the study of Oral Torah depends on textual skills in a way that theWritten Torah does not. Most women—but note that Maimonides does not say all women—lack these skills. The question does develop further (both by Maimonides and in later rabbinic sources) in terms of to what level or degree a father may educate a daughter in either the Oral or Written Torah. The answer hinges on the father’s knowledge of the daughter’s skill level and piety. An exceptional daughter, recognized by her father as such, may be taught Torah and in fact the rabbinic literature cites a handful of exemplary and extraordinary women (mothers, daughters, daughter-in-laws, wives and widows of rabbis) whose expertise in Torah and Talmud was respected and sought out.

While the exceptional woman is permitted access to Torah study, what of average women? The most persuasive modern argument in favour of expanding the purview of women’s education date from the beginning of the twentieth century with the origins of the Beth Jacob schools movement in 1917 Krakow Poland. The founder of the movement, Sara Schenirer (1883-
1935), argued the need for women’s religious education on the grounds that state mandated secular education for girls was contributing to escalating and alarming rates of assimilation among young women. She believed that a lack of Jewish education makes Jewish women in particular, and the Jewish community as a whole, more vulnerable to assimilation and the spiritual perils of modernity. Whereas the clear and overwhelming past practice limited women’s education to practical knowledge of halakha and basic Jewish teachings, the founder of the Beth Jacob schools argued that if you educate women they can be pious and knowledgeable members of the community as well as effective mothers raising the next generation of Jews. She wrote, “I want to return them to the traditional way of life, and to restore their pride in being daughters of the King, happy to fulfill His commandments with joy”. With an emphasis on teaching Torah as a spiritual and ethical shield, the Beth Jacob schools received support from key prominent rabbinic leaders in Krakow and elsewhere who framed the need for change in terms of dwindling communal and parental authority, state mandated secular education for girls, and “rampant” apostasy. The Chafetz Chaim, the renowned Polish halakhic decisor, determined that women should learn Torah and ethics:

But nowadays, in our iniquity, as parental tradition has been seriously weakened and women, moreover, regularly study secular subjects, it is certainly a great mitzvah to teach them Chumash, Prophets and Writings, and rabbinic ethics, such as Pirkei Avot, Menorat Hamaor, and the like, so as to validate our sacred belief, otherwise they may stray totally from God’s path and transgress the basic tenets of religion, God forbid.

The result of this innovation is that over the last century Torah study, but not study of Talmud and Halakhic texts, has become a normative part of Orthodox Jewish girls’ education.

In the contemporary setting, the result of these evolving debates is that (with the exception of a very small minority of ultra-conservative Ultra-Orthodox communities) Torah is widely taught to women. In terms of Talmudic study it is important to note that only in the last generation has Talmud study been accessible for Orthodox women in general. Although it has become fairly unremarkable for young modern Orthodox women to engage in such study it
remains a highly contentious issue for Ultra-Orthodox women and as, Ruti Feuchtwanger notes, is “still controversial and far from taken for granted” in Israeli Orthodox circles.12

Rabbanit Henkin’s standard that at every level women are to be taught to work with the primary texts and be trained in textual skills using models of learning that have traditionally been reserved for males is still notable in the Orthodox world. Henkin speaks with pride of hiring her first Talmud teachers and rejecting one after another because their plan for teaching women was based on secondary summaries of the Talmudic and rabbinic texts.13 It wasn’t until she found a teacher who would use the traditional texts that she was satisfied to offer the position.

Teaching Talmud to women the way boys and men learn is not only a halakhic question. Halakhically, Henkin and other advocates of women’s programs are on reasonably secure ground in teaching women these texts, methods and skills. More problematic is how these relatively new practices are potentially culturally disruptive. This issue has to at least partly be understood in terms of the honour given to gender roles. As much as men’s study is highly valued, women’s roles—as mother, spiritual heart’ of the home, as model of chesed14—are seen to be threatened by modern efforts to erase gender specific roles and difference. It is important to note that while Nishmat goes much further than most Orthodox institutions in providing textual training for women that approximates male yeshiva models, it is very careful to celebrate gender difference as spiritually rewarding and to place women’s study practices within the context of spiritually affirming those differences. Henkin, along with other leaders of similar programs, are explicit in asserting that such education does not cause women to eschew a path towards marriage and motherhood. Henkin’s use of the title Rabbanit, referring to her husband’s status as a scholar instead of her own, publicly reinforces the message: women’s education is no threat to traditional family values.15 On the contrary, in 2000 Bina Malka, founder of Matan, offered the following articulate defence of advanced women’s education that describes the pious desire for education as leading women happily back to the Jewish home:

Many of our women scholars combine career and family. Many of the young men are also studying. It forces young couples to work out new family patterns together. Women must juggle priorities. But the family also gives the woman-scholar support.
She can allow herself this new, innovative way of life because she is anchored in a Jewish family situation." ¹⁶

Support from a host of Orthodox rabbis and community leaders, in addition to Henkin’s well-respected husband Rabbi Yehuda Henkin, consolidates Nishmat’s position. ¹⁷ Although there are real opponents to women’s textual study in the Ultra-Orthodox community, there is widespread support in the Orthodox community in general who respond well to Henkin’s public critiques of contemporary feminism, affirmation of Orthodox ideals, and inclusion of family values and morality in the curriculum. ¹⁸

The program attracts a diverse student population with varying backgrounds, interests and motivations for participation. The overwhelming majority of students are from the United States, with some Canadians, and another small group of Israeli residents who are either native-born or recent immigrants. Although the core population is clearly made up of recent college graduates who are about to embark on post-graduate studies, students ranged from undergraduate students to young professionals to stay-at-home mothers to retired professionals. Most of the college-aged students were never married; almost all of the students over the age of 30 were married or divorced. Students overwhelmingly identified as Ashkenazic and more than two thirds identify as having come from relatively observant homes. Of the one third of the students who describe themselves as having been raised in less or non-observant Jewish households virtually all were under twenty-five years of age and had become observant as undergraduate students.

Methodology
Participants in this decidedly self-selecting group of subjects share an overwhelmingly positive relationship to Judaism in general and traditional Judaism in particular. Their collective interest in attending this program sets the stage for asking pointed questions about gender, feminism, religiosity and spirituality.

Although I saw myself as a fellow student, it soon became clear that I was a matter of curiosity at Nishmat: I was repeatedly asked why a young Jewish Studies professor—who identified as a feminist scholar, and who was not only not observant but clearly committed to

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progressive Judaism—had come to Nishmat? These informal impromptu conversations took place virtually as soon as I arrived at Nishmat and continued to take place over the next four weeks. They laid the foundation for the key questions that inform this project.

Findings here are based on the analysis of a combination of early informal conversations, follow-up one-on-one interviews and discussions in small groups, as well as a survey questionnaire. I began to actively and systematically collect data towards the last two weeks of the program during which time I developed and received thirty-four completed questionnaires and met with seventeen individuals and six groups for more focused conversations. As a participant in the program I also took notes at lectures, workshops, and class discussions that had immediate bearing on the project’s central questions.¹⁹

One last methodological curiosity should be noted. The types of data collected from informants broke down along lines of religious observance and religious backgrounds. More observant women from more Orthodox backgrounds responded to the anonymous surveys while more women from less traditional backgrounds preferred speaking with me individually and in groups. There was also much more concern among younger women from more observant backgrounds about how fairly I would represent Nishmat and their viewpoints and whether the research would be used to forward a “feminist agenda”.

In order to examine the ways that feminism, and particularly Jewish feminism, plays out in this group of Jewish women’s self-understanding as gendered, spiritual, and religious persons, it is helpful to think about two linked sets of questions. First, how do these women who have enrolled in an intensive text-based Jewish Studies summer program understand their own religiosity and spirituality? Specifically how does that self-understanding relate to their pursuit of religious literacy and textual expertise? Second, how does that pursuit of religious literacy and textual expertise inform their understanding of their own relation to feminism in general and Jewish feminism in particular?

Voices: Spirituality vs. Religion

Jane Strohl speaks of the “congenial spiritualities” that develop out of the common and communal experience of a religion, “if spiritualities grow out of religion, they also grow back...
into them, that is they provide an impetus of discovery, correction, and expansion or re-visioning of the fundamentals of faith.”^20 Whereas Strohl speaks of the potential uneasiness that arises in the Christian context when spirituality and religion are in tension, this study finds an account of spirituality as being harmonious and congruent with religion. In both interviews and questionnaires these women are most likely to resist popular oppositions between religion and spirituality. This opposition is commonly characterized by associating religion with empty doctrine and conventions, impersonal institutions, system, social pressure, and public expression, and spirituality with private experience, personal meaning, individual self-expression, and authenticity.^21 Yet these respondents clearly reject such binaries when asked to speak about what being “religious” or “spiritual” means to them. Subjects consistently affirm that traditional religious praxis is spiritually meaningful to them and speak about expressing private experience and personal faith and belief through public practices, behaviours, ethical decisions, dress etc. Harmonizing well with Arthur Green’s definition of Jewish spirituality as the “cultivation of a life in the ordinary world bearing the holiness once associated with sacred space and time,” these women characteristically resist definitions of religion and spirituality that oppose public and private, body and spirit, law and piety, or mind and heart.^22 Congruence between spirituality and religious observance is overwhelmingly understood as distinctive of Judaism in general, and Orthodox Judaism in particular.

While most subjects conflate spirituality, religious observance, and religiosity, even those who do recognize a possible disjunction will, in the next breath, stress the inseparability of religiosity and spirituality for themselves and for Judaism. When asked to respond to the statement “I am not religious, but I am spiritual” the women resoundingly reject this formulation for themselves. Anya for example replies, “I agree in theory—that someone can be spiritual but not religious (but) for myself—I disagree. Living a Torah observant life as I have chosen to do, means expressing the spiritual through acting in a religious way—trying to make a positive statement in the world.” For women like Anya, it is inconceivable to separate the two. This insistence on not distinguishing between the two diverges sharply from other studies which find that the distinction between religion and spirituality is correlated with definitions of spirituality.
that are “personal or experiential” and religiousness that “include personal beliefs … organizational or institutional beliefs and practices… and commitment to the belief system of a church or organized religion.” In contrast, this study finds that the boundaries between spirituality and religion are fully fluid for this group and that fluidity signals authenticity.

Again and again respondents acknowledge that others might be spiritual yet not religious. For themselves, such a distinction would be artificial and lead to inauthentic spiritual expression because “Jewish” religiosity is framed by observance and belief in Torah and halakha. Sarah insists, “yes—I see that people are in that space (where there is a disconnection between spirituality and religiosity). It isn’t ideal. Jewish wholeness demands both to be whole”.

Tellingly, the examples of such viable disconnection are non-Jewish and are most frequently among practitioners of alternative spiritualities who are not affiliated with mainstream religious groups (i.e. those who use meditation, yoga, or crystals for spiritual purposes). Here we are seeing examples of what Pamela Klassen describes as the flexibility of the term spirituality. Even those who have a fairly specific understanding of their own spirituality recognize other paths are possible. Some, like Dinah, acknowledge that before becoming observant they might well have fit in this category but recognized that their “best path” to spirituality is through religious observance.

Voices: Learning, Spirituality and Gender

Knowledgeable and sensitive to traditional laws and customs around gender and religious education, these students are well-armed advocates for women’s learning. Text-based study and the acquisition of textual skills are identified by these women as Jewish practices— and not only male Jewish practices—that represent the core of their Jewish spirituality and authentic membership within the Jewish community. In two linked questions, women were asked to prioritize those activities that were expressions of spirituality and that made them feel most spiritual. Although prayer and rituals often ranked highly among many respondents, study was most often cited as the most significant spiritual activity and was almost universally (over 90%) listed among the top three activities that were expressions of spirituality or activities that made them feel spiritual. Respondents prioritized those activities that are expressions of spirituality
and that make them feel most spiritual. This valuation of study and learning as spiritual
endeavour is at the heart of Nishmat and other women’s study programs where study is explicitly
described as a “spiritual quest.”

In light of the history of women’s exclusion from Torah and Talmud study, what is
perhaps most striking about these women as a group is their expectation that they have full
access to textual study and to acquiring textual expertise and their facility in the arguments that
are key to women’s learning. Although they are aware that some Jewish communities do not
encourage textual study for women, and they are conscious that their experience of textual study
is different from men, they have no sense that there is any practical limitation to what they can
study if they have the time and ability to do so. They perceive a range of choices and
opportunities to study in North America and Israel within the Orthodox world. Women with a
variety of life experiences felt this way. Of the married or engaged students almost all had
partners who were also pursuing textual study or who had done so in the past. These women
described their mutual commitment to Torah study as comparable in rigorousness, seriousness,
and spirituality to that of their partners whether or not their partners were at the same stage of
textual expertise or indeed were considerably more advanced. Of those couples where both
partners were committed to Torah study, the male partner was almost always more advanced
having spent years in secondary or post-secondary yeshiva settings. The women who identified
as Ba’al Teshuvah (women who were raised in non-traditional homes and who “return” to
Orthodox Judaism) were simply surprised by the question and fully understood their own lack of
training in terms of secular home life. Those from more religiously observant backgrounds
recognize they are “behind” men of their own age from their own community in terms of textual
mastery but they also do not perceive in this reality any sense that there is a limit to what they
can learn. More importantly, no student expressed any frustration with traditional educational
models that normatively produced textually expert young men but regularly produced women
who were years behind the men in terms of textual mastery and the ability to pursue independent
study. They also did not perceive any theoretical limitation in terms of the training needed to
teach this material at upper levels. Although several students were planning to teach at the
primary and secondary level, none of these expected to teach Talmudic texts. Only one student hoped to teach texts at an advanced and post-secondary level in a modern Orthodox setting. For women who identify the program at Nishmat as being analogous to men’s yeshivot, there was no reason to expect that they couldn’t achieve the same level of training—even though they did not foresee being able to devote the same number of years of full-time study as men enjoyed. It is only the older students, in their 40s, 50s and 60s, who recognize how extraordinary it is for women to be trained in this way. They spoke of how fortunate they felt at being able to study as the men did. They felt privileged both for having the time and resources to study at this stage in their lives and because they were aware that such opportunities had not been available to them when they were younger. Several spoke of devoting their retirement to further study for their own spiritual reasons and personal pleasure in learning. None expected to truly master the texts or the skills necessary to engage in halakhic formation.

Voices: Spirituality, Feminism, and Gender

The women who are most likely to understand that spirituality is highly gendered trace their own appreciation of that connection to their personal discomfort with secular society’s forsaking of traditional gender roles. Rivka explains her own synthesis “I feel like my gender and sexuality is deeply connected with my spirituality. I believe that as a woman I connect to the spiritual world differently…” Three decades earlier, Lynn Davidman described how the Orthodox “community’s clear delineation of separate roles for men and women was a welcome contrast to the blurring and confusion about these roles in secular society” for women attracted to the Orthodox community. In 2007, the women of Nishmat describe modernity’s “experiment” with erasing sex-based difference as a failure they wished to escape. In turn, these women feel a strong affinity for the highly gendered religious praxis that they see as enacting a spiritually meaningful gender balance in Judaism. For Rivka, the equation is simple: “because if I was a man I would have a different spiritual connection, one dependent on a minyan, tefillin, tzitzit, … kipa, prayer” –all male-performed ritual practices that in the Orthodox community break down along gender lines and where spirituality is experienced through religious praxis. Still, when the question of gender and spirituality is correlated with questions about feminist identity, this is the
group who identifies most clearly as feminist, having a feminist mother and having feminist friends. They see a parallel between their generation’s feminism’s celebration of embodiment, diversity, and motherhood with Judaism’s positive views of sexuality, sexual difference, and the status of women.

Alternately, a core group of Nishmat students resist defining their spirituality as gendered or woman-centred but simultaneously recognize that their expression of religiosity and spirituality are both clearly embodied and keyed to their status as women in the Jewish tradition. Evenly split between women who were born into Orthodox families and Ba’alot Teshuvot, these women see Judaism’s gender roles as both comforting and superior to secular egalitarianism. They are more likely to embrace traditional Jewish accounts of women as spiritual and describe women as “spiritual creatures”, “naturally more spiritual” and having a “closer connection to God”. Like the American Ba’alot Teshuvot described in Debra Kaufman’s study, these women have internalized the message that the qualities explicate distinct gender roles that exempt women from obligation to study. Twenty years later, this group pursues Torah and Talmud study with enthusiasm and diligence even while they acknowledge that they are not halakhically obligated to study and affirm gendered accounts of femininity that have historically marginalized women from study. The irony is lost on few scholars who have noted this phenomenon. As Naomi Graetz observes, “Ironically this attitude leads to a belief that women’s culture is the source for transformation of humanity, a view shared by radical feminists. Yet the Orthodox women accept the rules set up by patriarchy, unlike feminists who want autonomy”. This seeming contradiction is best understood against the background of the increasing centrality of textual study as the path to religious observance and piety that has characterized Orthodox and specifically Ultra-Orthodox life over the last thirty years. As textual study becomes more important for all Orthodox Jews, all Orthodox Jews, male and female, see the need for women to become more literate in Torah and Talmud. In conjunction with anxiety about assimilation and acculturation, this generation of Orthodox Jews (like the rabbis that permitted Torah study for Beth Jacob students in 1917), see study as the best spiritual protection for women and men, and
view universal textual literacy as the best way to strengthen the Orthodox community and ensure its continuity.

Although these gendered spiritual narratives are frequently entwined with traditional rabbinic rhetoric around women’s nature and respective roles in Judaism, many do not admit gender as key to their own spirituality. Michaela explains in theological terms: “I relate to God as a person created in His image. Since God has no gender, that’s not an important aspect of my relationship with Him (even though I’m using masculine pronouns!)” There is a marked tendency among this group to describe feminism in negative terms where feminism is anti-masculine and advocating a dangerous and distortive blindness to gender difference. Anya muses “I think nowadays we have to fight to be able to express ourselves as being equal but female and different, rather to compete to be masculine in a male world. We have achieved the latter, and I don’t think it has been good for us”. Those who share this view are also more prone to describe their mothers and friends as not being feminists. How to explain this seeming cognitive dissonance between their describing Jewish women in gendered spiritual terms yet affirming their own spirituality in gender neutral or even neutered terms? Resistance to contemporary feminist spiritualities and feminist critiques of religion that challenge male God-language and invite feminine accounts of the Divine, compounded with anxiety about the use a feminist researcher will make of their responses, coalesces around a general rabbinic discomfort with anthropomorphizing the Divine. It is arresting that these are the women who tend to emphasize advanced textual study as spiritually, religiously, politically, and culturally important to them, understand that historically women have been excluded from Torah study, recognize that women have been at the forefront of establishing women’s access to textual study, and yet decline to view the pursuit of that expertise as feminist.

A sense of ambivalence about feminism colours most of the young women’s responses. Among those respondents that do identify as feminist, few do so unequivocally and most specify being most comfortable with some variation of feminism as promoting an “equal but different” model. Mara defines her feminist identity as “a commitment to the empowerment, expression, growth and fulfilment of individual women, the global community of women, and the unfolding
of a feminine way of relating to G-d and the world”. Shoshanna defines her feminist identity as “Separate but equal. I believe women should not be seen as any less important in Judaism or in the world as compared to men. But I strongly believe that men are women are different, with different roles and purposes, and that’s not something that needs to change”. These feminist-identified women are somewhat more likely to say that their mothers and friends defined themselves as feminist. When asked about whether they identify as Jewish feminists, this group was again more likely to say yes but stipulate, as Devorah did “I believe in embracing what Ha Shem gave to women; not trying to take on what he gave to men”. These subjects repeatedly insist on definitions of feminism and Jewish feminism that explicitly affirm diverse approaches and experiences that include traditionally “feminine” paths.

Surprisingly few of those respondents that do identify as feminists also describe themselves as Jewish feminists. Those that do so tend to be older (at least twenty-five), have more exposure to women’s studies and gender studies courses at the university level, and are most clear in their articulation of their own identity as feminists with the least tendency to offer pre-emptive defensive definitions of their feminism. These respondents are also most likely to share their discomfort with what they acknowledge as patriarchal aspects of the tradition. Devorah explains quietly “It was my unhappiness as a woman within Judaism that brought me to feminism” and adds in a written response that it is urgent for Jewish women to study traditional texts about women because “Knowledge is power (smiley face) [One] can’t engage with systemic practices without knowing firsthand [in an unmediated way] about them.”

These women see gaining religious expertise as both an end in itself and a means to pursue deeper participation in religious praxis. While Tamar El-Or’s analysis of post-secondary women’s study programs in the mid 1990s at Bar-Ilan University focuses on this phenomenon in terms of shifting boundaries of religious praxis, this research finds that the most religiously literate observant students are also the most explicitly conscious that some boundaries have shifted over time and whose halakhic basis requires investigation. Again and again, this subgroup of students focuses in on questions of distinguishing between minhag (custom) and halakha (law) in areas that define women’s exclusion and/or non-obligation from religious
practice. This enterprise requires considerable halakhic expertise, suggests that women may participate in halakhic formation, and yet is not understood as revolutionary or subversive. These responses throw into sharp relief the deeply entrenched suspicion of feminism that many of these students, and the Orthodox community in which Nishmat operates, share.

The close modeling of Nishmat classes on male yeshiva classes begs the question of the feminist significance of this pursuit of masculine-modeled expertise in male produced texts that arose in a patriarchal context. Since most classes that address advanced halakhic questions are also taught by male experts in classes that begin with chavruta study of primary texts and the chain of interpretation connected to those texts and end with a discussion-based seminar, it is telling that these movements occur in the classes that are most closely modeled on traditional content and methods. Those students who are most advanced in their scholarship and most clear in their desire to map out the “true” halakhic boundaries of women’s religious lives, are also those students who are also most likely to agree with thinkers like Tamar Ross that the integrity of the halakhic system cannot be dictated by feminist criticism:

Instead of the traditional "Let the law pierce the mountain," comes "Let the mountain pierce the law" -- the implication being (a) that Halakhah, in its entirety, is determined by humanly conceived considerations of social well-being and popular concern (b) that given sufficient motivation there are virtually no limits within Halakhah for accommodation to these considerations (c) that all Halakhic argumentation and rationalization is just so much window dressing after the fact.33

Although most students do not know Ross as a scholar they closely echo Ross’ criticism of Orthodox feminist Blu Greenberg’s now infamous dictum “where there’s a rabbinic will, there’s a halakhic way” that calls for rabbinic solutions to the problem of Agunot (literally “chained women” who are unable to procure a Jewish divorce).34 Familiar with the Greenberg quote, students (and Ross) view Greenberg as advocating an instrumentalist view of Halakha that is foreign to the internal logic of Jewish law and tradition. Typically attributing a level of radical feminist activism to Greenberg that Greenberg would herself repudiate, these students see Greenberg as advocating a feminist—and therefore alien—solution to women’s halakhic problems, and see their own notable training in traditional exegesis as authentic, legitimate, native and

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conservative. It is unsurprising then that these women are deeply disturbed by mainstream feminism’s critique of institutionalized religions in general and Judaism’s patriarchal roots in particular. Whereas Audre Lorde might argue that “The Master's tools will never dismantle the Master's house”, these women repudiate the need to dismantle the house in the first place and affirm that the Master’s tools are the only way to understand how best to live in that house. They, like Orthodox feminist Tamar Frankiel, are largely unconcerned by women’s exclusion from the development of this corpus and trust that there is an essential balance in the tradition that ensures justice for women. There is real anxiety that critique leads to transformation that in turn threatens Judaism as a tradition. Perhaps the better aphorism for this group of women comes from Rabbi Joseph Caro who instructed, “Do not demolish a synagogue to build a new one; perhaps the other will never be built.”

Conclusion

Heard against the background of scholarly debates about religion and spirituality as well as Jewish feminist scholarship around women’s spiritual practices, this project pulls at the warp and weft of narratives about religion, spirituality, gender and feminism and suggests a more nuanced integration of these highly contested terms. Whereas previous research emphasizes how that the boundaries between religion and spirituality are both substantive and functional, this study of Jewish women highlights the fluid integration of these terms at the same time it exposes their contingency. This contingency, framed by experiences of feminism, religious upbringing, commitment to observance, and reflections on gender identity, suggests an intriguing interplay between feminist, Orthodox, and popular discourses that is playing out in the pursuit of advanced textual and halakhic expertise.

In an essay from the mid 1990s on Jewish secular feminist spirituality, Laura Levitt argued for a rethinking of Jewish spirituality. She stressed that Jewish feminist identity politics involved a “cultural and political reclaiming of Jewishness” and where that spirituality is “manifest in terms of transformative political and cultural practices”. A little more than a decade later we are seeing the “quiet revolution” of Jewish women’s learning a reclaiming of not
only spirituality but of religious literacy, and through that expertise, communal authority and increased religious participation.

Yet it is the contentious definitions of feminism entangled in these narratives that are most striking to me as a feminist scholar. The central paradox of contemporary Jewish women’s religious learning is that this “quiet revolution” is seen by its advocates as a necessary protection against modern influences that erode commitment to traditional Jewish life. Modernity, signified by and conflated with feminism, is seen as the single greatest threat to these communities. Modernity and feminism have become so entangled in these discourses that practices that would otherwise clearly be understood as feminist in any other setting—such as the training of female halakhic advisors, decisors, and educators, as well as the overall raising of the bar of standards of women’s religious literacy—are explicitly defined in not only non-feminist but even anti-feminist terms. Rabbi Avraham Yosef Wolf, founder and principal of Beit Ya’akov for Girls illustrates this paradox: The purpose of women’s learning “is to aspire to emulate the matriarchs, who did not study.” The consequences of this modern paradox plays out in the classrooms and common rooms of Nishmat and other institutions that offer women’s advanced learning where a generation of young women carefully negotiate their own identities as young modern Orthodox women who pursue a life of Torah.

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Because Ethiopian Jewry developed in historical isolation from rabbinic Judaism there are significant theological and ritual divergences between the two. From an Orthodox perspective, religiously educating women is particularly important because women are responsible for the home and raising children.


These programs tend to use the term Bet Midrash and rarely use the term yeshiva. The term “woman’s yeshiva” is avoided among more conservative circles as it elides gender distinctions.


Other notable programs for women’s study of Torah, Talmud and Halakha include the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education in New York, and Matan, Midreshet Lindenbaum, Bar Ilan University Midrasha , Bet Midrash Hagevoah L’Nashim at Kibbutz Migdal Oz, and the Kibbutz Hadati Hesder program in Israel. Note that this is really not an issue for the non-Orthodox Jewish world either within Israel or in the Diaspora where egalitarianism is very much taken for granted in matters relating to prayer and study. Both the Conservative and Reform movements run co-ed yeshivot and it is possible to pursue graduate degrees in rabbinic texts through several secular Israeli universities.

Talmudic literature does not include examples of women as rabbis or community leaders. There are however a handful of examples of women, mostly wives and/or daughters of rabbis, who were considered expert in the law and are cited as authoritative voices in rare instances. Beruriah, daughter of Rabbi Hannaniah ben Taradion and wife of Rabbi Meir, is exceptionally quoted twice in the Mishnah, is described as challenging her father on a question of law on ritual purity (Tosefta Keilim Bava Kamma 4:9) and as having “spoken correctly” in a debate between Rabbi Tarphon and the sages (Tosefta Keilim Bava Metzia 1:3). Mentioned only in the Babylonian Talmud, Yalta is identified as the wife of Rabbi Nahman and the daughter of the powerful family of the Exilarch. She is described as challenging a sages’s ruling on a matter of ritual purity and persevering leading to the rabbinic dictum that women be trusted when they state a precedent regarding blood samples (Niddah 20b). Another interesting example is Em; a vague figure who is cited authoritatively on various matters including medical questions (see Charlotte Fonrobert, Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender (Berkeley: Stanford University Press, 2000)151–159). See Valler, S.. Women and Womanhood in the Talmud. B. S. Rozen. Brown Judaic Series. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999) and Abrams, J. Z. The Women of the Talmud. (Northvale, NJ and London: Jason Aronson Inc. 1995).

10 Rabbi Israel Meir HaKohen (Kagan), Likkutei Halachot, Sotah 20b.
11 Feuchtwanger, 167.
12 Feuchtwanger, 167
14 Chesed refers to loving-kindness that exceeds halakhic expectations. Chesed is often associated with women.
16 Furstenberg.
17 Regarded as a posek (halakhic decisor), Rabbi Yehuda Henkin is a prolific scholar who has authored several significant volumes of responsa on contemporary halakhic matters.

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Henkin is much more at risk of criticism on the basis of the Halakhic Advisors program which raises the question of whether or not such training is a precursor to the ordination of female Orthodox rabbis—a prospect that would associate Nishmat with the radical feminist transformation of (Orthodox) Judaism. If Nishmat becomes tarred with this particular brush, Orthodox support for any of its programs would evaporate.


Klassen “Procreating women and religion.”

Dr. Vered Noam, former director of Midrashet Lindenbaum, quoted in Furstenberg.

See Feuchtwanger, 171-172, for the sense of frustration women may feel in recognizing the difference between the average yeshiva student’s degree of training and their own. The women in this survey contrast with Feuchtwanger’s in that they are summer students who are relatively early in their progress towards mastery of these texts and textual skills. Even the most advanced groups are not as expert as Feuchtwanger’s sample which focuses on women scholars who also teach in these institutions.


There is a description of the Divine as feminine in Jewish mysticism with the Shekhinah the feminine in-dwelling presence of God, but as Michael L. Satlow points out “even then [the rabbis] avoid giving the Shekhinah any attributes that they mark as feminine”. Creating Judaism: Tradition, History, Practice, (New York: Columbia University Press: 2006), 147.

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32 Tamar El-Or Next Year I Will Know More: Literacy and Identity Among Young Orthodox Women in Israel. Detroit: Wayne State University Press. 2002
34 Tamar Ross, 478
37 R. Joseph Caro, Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim, 152:1.
39 El-Or quoting Wolf in Educated and Ignorant, 65