
HER GLORY ALL WITHIN:
Rejecting and Transforming
Orthodoxy in Israeli and American
Jewish Women's Fiction

STUDIES IN ORTHODOX JUDAISM

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Barbara Ann Landress

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INTRODUCTION

In both contemporary Israeli and American literature, Jewish Orthodoxy has emerged only recently as a literary subject. Israeli writers raised in a secular Jewish state whose founders defined the “New Hebrew” in opposition to the traditional European Jew tended to distance themselves from the Jewish past, as did well-known American-Jewish writers of the post-World War II generation. Marginalization of the traditional past in the interest of constructing an Israeli secular society or acculturating to America has given way, in more recent decades, to interest in and attempts to reckon with traditional Jewish values and lifestyles.

I consider representations of Jewish Orthodoxy in American and Israeli women’s fiction published between 1980 and the present and argue that these two bodies of literature reflect strikingly different attitudes toward Orthodoxy. American women writers who engage with Orthodoxy tend to highlight the close bonds and rich communal life forged by Sabbath observance, the yearly cycle of holiday celebrations, and other shared rituals. They are concerned with the ways in which women’s work is central to preserving and passing along traditions that place family and community at the center and provide structure and meaning in a fragmented and chaotic society. In contrast, Israeli women’s representations of Orthodoxy are varied and complex, featuring narratives that range from novels of complaint to plots that condemn political extremism, express desire for greater participation of women in religious practice, and thematize the rift between secular and Orthodox. In American Jewish women’s writing, Orthodox women are privileged bearers of tradition. In contrast, in Israeli novels that engage traditional Judaism, women are victims of oppression, develop a critical stance toward community norms, or construct complex, fluid identities that refuse narrow definition of religious and cultural affiliation.¹

¹ The Israeli novels that I analyze, and many to which I refer, are not available in English. All translations herein from Hebrew are my own except where indicated otherwise. All translations of the bible, unless indicated otherwise, are from *Tanakh: the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

While this discussion pays attention to aesthetic values, it also accepts the argument that literature performs “cultural work,” in that it both reflects culture and changes it (Burstein 1996: 4). I am skeptical of the association between experimental style and subversive potential, and the value judgment that such an association implies. I consider realist heroines in realist novels (with the exception of Brandes’ magical realism in *Lekhabot ’et ha’ahava* [Quench Love]) that are not uniformly of high aesthetic value. Yet, each of the writers whose work I address is attuned to a battle between dueling worlds. That similar issues are being addressed by writers whose backgrounds, abilities and audiences vary, establishes that feminism, Judaism and contemporary social contexts intersect to create a group of distinctive issues for Jewish women.

I am interested in how literature in which feminist critique of patriarchy is mediated by the felt religious and cultural authority of traditional Judaism reflects and seeks to shape the continuing dialogue between Judaism and feminism. This study seeks to historicize and contextualize a distinctive body of contemporary women’s writing in the social and cultural context within which it emerged—the decades following the height of what is known as 1970’s second-wave feminism (discussed in Chapter Two). To that end, I will outline developments in Jewish feminism and draw on feminist and Jewish feminist theory, as well as genre theory, to examine the diverse ways in which the literature is shaped by and answers back to feminism to reflect changing views about feminism itself. Finally, I seek both to highlight national differences, and also a range of ideological interests and attitudes toward women’s subjectivity.

Chapter One contextualizes the literature I will discuss within a feminist and Jewish feminist public sphere and within the Israeli socio-political context. Chapter Two, in the tradition of Showalter’s gynocritics, discusses and puts in theoretical perspective themes that recur and that I trace throughout the corpus of women’s narratives representing Orthodoxy.

Chapters Three and Four explore narratives that represent haredi women’s lives and critique traditional gender roles in haredi communities in a way explicitly allied with the concerns of the women’s movement. Writing from personal experience, Hanna Bat Shahar, Yocheved Reisman, and Yehudit Rotem employ different poetics to represent repression and struggle for agency within a framework in which men exercise absolute religious authority. Bat Shahar models her fiction on Amalya Kahana-Carmon’s earlier novels, which highlight women’s passivity by casting

feminist complaint in terms of the “dysphoric” romance.² Reisman goes further to explode the promise of haredi family life by exposing the thoroughly dysfunctional and unstable relationships between haredi family members who try hard to maintain a facade of social acceptability. In contrast to Bat Shazar and Reisman who fashion passive protagonists, Rotem creates a heroine who strikes out for freedom, explicitly engaging the model of the American feminist consciousness-raising novel.

I then show in Chapter Five how American writers revise the consciousness-raising model. For example, Allegra Goodman, Anne Roiphe, Rebecca Goldstein and Naomi Ragen (a novelist who lives in Israel but first published in English in the United States) enlist haredi Orthodoxy to critique American models of feminist emancipation. American Jewish women’s narratives introduce feminist/meliorist plots in which protagonists affirm the value of Orthodoxy but employ various strategies to neutralize its threat to female autonomy. Their novels anticipate Israeli women’s narratives which legitimate, privilege and seek to revise gender roles within Orthodoxy.

Chapter Six discusses fiction that addresses social and political conflict in Israel. In analyzing these narratives, I employ concepts drawn from postcolonial theory about the relationship between self and other to explore the ways in which Yochi Brandes and Mira Kedar create or disrupt oppositions between male and female, religious and secular, Jew and Arab. My focus in this chapter is on Brandes’ and Kedar’s intensive engagement with Israeli politics. However, here too, a focus on gender proves a powerful tool, as Brandes renders a gendered critique of Israeli right-wing politics and Kedar’s settlement-building activities place her in the vanguard of a politically and religiously activist group of ultra-nationalist Israeli women.

Finally, Chapter Seven discusses the novels of Mira Magen and Lilach Galil El-ami, who problematize female agency to a lesser degree than others, yet engage feminism in their representation of protagonists who affirm Jewish spirituality. These narratives particularly emphasize personal relationships and the body in exploring Orthodox values and Jewish

² In her study of eighteenth century French and English novels, Miller detected two plots for women, the “euphoric” and the “dysphoric.” The euphoric text concludes with the heroine’s successful marriage, while the dysphoric text ends in her death, usually as a result of a fatal mis-step in the area of sexuality, a *liaison dangereuse* (Miller 1980: x, xi). DuPlessis and Feldman discuss the efforts of nineteenth and twentieth century women writers to compromise with or transcend the euphoric text (DuPlessis 1985; Feldman 1999: 30-42).

spirituality. As such, their narratives resonate with French feminist theories that exalt women's relational capacities and female homoeroticism, and celebrate women's reproductive powers. Magen portrays protagonists who draw on values central to Orthodoxy to articulate a basis for a universal ethic of connection. More radically, El-ami's heroine extends the bounds of Jewish spiritual experience to encompass lesbian sexuality and childbirth. Their narratives carry forward on the level of personal consciousness the reformist tendency which other Israeli women writers bring to bear on politics and public religious practice.

One further purpose of my analysis is to illuminate the complexity of the ongoing interplay between feminism and Judaism as each evolves. In America, the Jewish religious landscape is varied, and organized alternatives to Orthodox religious practice abound even as sociologists debate the long-term viability of Judaism in America. American women's narratives about Orthodoxy demonstrate its continuing relevance to the development of Judaism in America. In contrast, Israelis have emphasized national identity over religious heritage, failing to develop vital, religious alternatives to Orthodoxy. El-Or notes: "Unlike Diaspora Jews who strive to reform, adjust, claim, and reclaim their religious and cultural identity, secular Israelis leave this to the state and to orthodoxy" (El-Or 1994: 210). While El-Or's statement captures the ascendancy of Orthodoxy in Israel's organized religious life (an ascendancy with broad legal, political and cultural implications), the narratives I discuss form a literary feminist corpus that, in conversation with American and Israeli literary feminisms, registers transformation of Orthodoxy both in private consciousness and public practice.

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A. ISRAELI FEMINISM AND LITERARY FEMINISM

Literary representation of the religious sector in Israel is a new phenomenon that has emerged from a more general diversification of Israeli culture beginning in the 1970s. Since that time, Israeli literature has opened up to new subjects and themes, “exposing hidden aspects” of society that “had been formerly repressed, suppressed, or ignored” and often revealing “a certain ideological disorientation” (Feldman 1989b: 49-51). The new diversity is related to the post-1967 psychological and ideological readjustment (52), followed by the breakdown of labor Zionism as the dominant ideological force in Israel, or, as Mintz has described: “the breakdown of a single story into many stories” (Mintz 1997: 8). Yig’al Schwartz (an editor of Bat Shahar’s novels) also refers to the ideological crisis of the 1970’s in accounting for the emergence of writers from the Orthodox sector:

For fifty years there was a Zionist bloc in Hebrew literature: it was secular, national, ethnocentric, and looked back in anger, negated the diaspora and religiosity, and dreamed of realization of the ideology of the second *aliya*. Other than Yehoshua Bar-Yosef and a few isolated others, members of the “old *yishuv*” had no chance of breaking into the system of Zionist literature. The Zionist center crumbled and Oz began to write a requiem to the *sabra*, A.B. Yehoshua remembered that he’s *sephardic*, and tribalism began to rise. Today there is a place for one who writes about his tribal experience and not just about the national aspect (Schwartz 1997).

While women writers had been slow to enter the Hebrew literary canon, a boom in women’s literature beginning in the 1980s continued the trend toward diversity on the Israeli literary scene. Women’s poetry had entered the Hebrew literary canon in the 1920s, but until the past two decades, prose

fiction remained largely the domain of male writers. The rapid development of women's fiction since the 1980s was influenced, no doubt, by Israel's changed ideological landscape with its new focus on the margins, and by the Anglo-American feminism then taking root in Israel. The publication in 1994 of *Hakol ha'aher* [The Other Voice], a collection of women's fiction edited by Lily Rattok, demonstrated the substantial and diverse contribution of contemporary women writers to Israeli literature.

As Yael Feldman demonstrated in her 1999 study, *No Room of Their Own: Gender and Nation In Israeli Women's Fiction*, Israeli women's ambivalent embrace of western feminisms is a crucial factor in understanding both the belated development and trajectory of Israeli women's writing. The American women's movement generated a renaissance in women's fiction beginning in the late 1960s by encouraging writers, legitimating new subject areas for literature, launching new presses and drawing readers (Lauret 1994: 12). The "consciousness raising" novel represented the activities of the feminist consciousness raising group with its emancipatory goals and contributed to an Anglo-American feminist fiction of the 1970s and 1980s that featured "big rambling novels where women were, unashamedly, at large" (Lauret 1994: 1). Writing, analyzing and teaching literature, and formulating theory were considered front-line activities of the women's movement.¹ Israel, however, proved a tougher ground for feminist activism, with implications for both women's literary activity and the representation of women as literary subjects.

Throughout the 1970s, Israel was an inhospitable environment for feminism, despite its long-standing declaration of a socialist adherence to the principle of women's equality. First, the wave of immigration to Israel from European and Middle Eastern countries following World War II transformed Israel's demographic and cultural landscape. From that period and onward, a large segment of Israel's population found alien the founders' vision of socialist equality, while new forms of feminism were perceived as equally antagonistic to more traditional Middle Eastern and/or Orthodox lifestyles. Second, the state of constant siege, as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict, relegated feminist concerns to the background and contributed to the construction of motherhood as women's national mission (Feldman 1999: 9; Sered 2000: 22-23). Alice Shalvi (born in Germany and raised in England),

¹ Prefatory remarks to critical works on women's writing attest to the important role that female academics believe women's fiction has played in effecting personal and political change. See, e.g., Greene 1991: ix; Lauret 1994: viii; Showalter 1985b: 5.

a leader of the Israeli feminist movement, has described Israeli women's double bind: the paradoxical situation of a declared ideology of equality in an environment hostile to feminism. Shalvi states (retrospectively) that she founded the Israel Women's Network in 1984, a key feminist organization, in order to "[combat] a climate of opinion in which feminism was considered irrelevant because Israel was perceived as having already achieved equality between the sexes" (Shalvi 1995).

In her investigation of the emergence of the female subject in Israeli women's fiction, Feldman plumbs the paradox that Shalvi described. Drawing on the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf as paradigms, she traces the hesitant assimilation of western feminism by the foremothers of contemporary Israeli women's writing, in whose narratives the audacious heroines of American feminist dramas were slow to emerge. She documents the struggle of these writers with feminist aspirations under specific socio-historical conditions, demonstrating how feminist aspiration struggled with national identification, historical exigency and with a self-doubt generated by the Zionist opposition of masculine strength and feminine weakness. Throughout the 1980s, the literary image of the New Hebrew Woman began finally to develop as Amalya Kahana-Carmon engaged the critique of woman's alterity begun by de Beauvoir, Shulamith Hareven tested the limits of androgyny, and the writers Netiva Ben Yehuda, Shulamit Lapid and Ruth Almog created new plots for strong female characters.

In her Afterword, however, Feldman already notes the waning in the 1990s of the literary feminist protest that had only recently emerged, and ascribes it to postmodernism's influence on Israeli culture. She notes that in the 1990s, women writers tend to bypass or parody the feminist narrative altogether (Feldman 1999: 226). With the de-centering of the national consensus (discussed below), feminism fell victim to the same debunking of meta-narratives that exposed the bankruptcy of Zionist mythology. Moreover, with movement of those on the cultural margins to the center, women are able to hold the spotlight so that feminism might seem superfluous. Invoking Amalya Kahana-Carmon's ironic assessment of the nature of this shift, Feldman raises the question of whether the recent proliferation of women's literature reflects a substantive change in women's status at the same time as she looks forward to "new modalities of feminist consciousness" (Feldman 1999: 229-231).

But if integration of western feminist ideas was a long and difficult process among secular, *ashkenazi* writers, it would take a decade longer for writers from the religious sector, either openly hostile to or skeptical

of modern ideologies, to emerge and grapple with feminist concerns. The absorption of feminist ideals by Orthodox women is bound up in changes in the education and employment of women; even as Orthodoxy tried to carry forward a relatively unchanged tradition, women's lives within Orthodoxy were being transformed by broad currents of change. In the following section, I discuss scholarship on the changing roles of Orthodox women and their ambivalent reception of feminism.

But before I do this, it is necessary to discuss the general problem of defining Jewish Orthodoxy. Throughout my analysis, I divide Israel's religious sector, as is customary there, into two groups: *haredi* (or ultra-Orthodox) and national religious (or Modern Orthodox). The *haredi* segment consists of those Jews who resist modernization and remain determined closely to imitate an idealized, constructed vision of pre-modern, traditional Jewish Eastern European life (Friedman 1991: 6-8; Danzger 1989: 9). The term *haredi* includes diverse groups with varying traditions and different attitudes toward modernity, including communities centered around nineteenth century Lithuanian style *yeshivas*, *hasidic* sects, a strict Hungarian Orthodoxy, and the old *ashkenazi* religious of Jerusalem (Friedman 1991: 7). In contrast to *haredim*, Modern Orthodox Jews embrace modernity and limit their participation in secular society only to the extent that *halakha* [religious law] may require (Danzger 1989: 9). Consistent with that approach, Israel's Modern Orthodox are Zionists and are often referred to as *dati le'umi* [national religious]—a term sometimes associated in the public mind with Gush Emunim, the settlers' movement, and an ultra-nationalist stance in which Zionism takes on religious significance (Liebman 1993: 354-5). To further complicate the picture, the polarized terms *dati* [religious] and *hiloni* [secular] that Israelis use to describe social sectors is not entirely descriptive. Social scientists have observed that Israelis are far more traditional in their behavior and beliefs than had heretofore been imagined, so that the rhetoric of polarization between observant and non-observant may be exaggerated, at least from a behavioral point of view (Liebman and Katz 1997:xviii). While many "secular" Israelis would prefer to define themselves as *masorti* [traditional] (Liebman 1993: 358), the term *hiloni* is often used in Israel as a catch-all for all non-Orthodox identities. Throughout this book, I employ the terms commonly used in Israel to describe social groups. However, I recognize the inadequacy of these terms to capture the distinctiveness of the various communities the literature describes. I hope that through my discussion of the fiction a more nuanced picture of Orthodoxy emerges.

B. FEMINISM AND THE HAREDI WOMAN

Haredi Orthodoxy represents those Jews most hostile to modern ideologies. Studies of haredi women bring into sharp relief conflict between feminism and haredi Judaism and illuminate the ideological contours of the world from which haredi-affiliated writers (Bat Shazar, Reisman, Rotem) draw their themes. Prior to the processes of secularization and modernization that began in the late eighteenth century, Jews in Europe largely adhered to norms that dictated separate spheres for men and women. Haredi Jews resisted modernization and adhered to the belief that ideally haredi sons were to immerse themselves as much as possible in Torah study while daughters were supposed to learn what they needed to know to create a Jewish home by helping their mothers. Friedman gives a detailed historical account of how changes in religious women's education that began in Eastern Europe during the nineteenth century led to transformation of the haredi woman's role.

Religious education for women within Orthodoxy developed in Europe and later in Israel only as a concession to historical exigency. When education for women became more fashionable and accessible in society at large, some women pursued a general education often denied to men who were obligated to engage in religious studies. Against the background of the European economic crises of the later nineteenth century, women often went out to work and were exposed to the ideas of Jewish political parties and to secular knowledge. Paula Hyman has shown how work and educational patterns among Eastern European Jews in the second half of the nineteenth century facilitated the more rapid assimilation of women than men into the surrounding secular culture (Hyman 1995: 50-92). The fact that women were being exposed to western ideas, and the sense that traditional society was losing ground, lessened resistance to haredi women's education. Eventually the revered religious authority, the Hafetz Hayim, gave approval to women's education: because of changed historical circumstances the rabbinic dictum that teaching a daughter Torah is teaching her *tiflut* [folly] could no longer be valid (Friedman 1995: 279).² The development of educational institutions

² The Talmud exempts women from Torah study. Maimonides cites Rabbi Eliezer's minority opinion that teaching your daughter Torah is teaching her folly to support his contention that women should be prohibited, rather than merely exempt, from Torah study (*Mishne Torah*, *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 1:13 cited by Ner-David 2000: 190-191). Ner-David gives a well-reasoned analysis (or deconstruction) of these sources on women's Torah study.

for haredi women began in 1917 when Sarah Schenirer founded in Krakow the first of the Bet Ya'akov schools.³ The Bet Ya'akov schools had little time to develop in Europe but laid the foundation for the institutionalization of haredi women's education in Israel (Friedman 1995: 279-280) where they became the central force in the socialization of haredi women. But as Friedman points out, women's education within haredi society remains a departure from the ideal, a necessary but undesirable adjustment to the exigencies of the times (Friedman 1991: 16-17).

The destruction of European Jewry in the Holocaust compelled haredi refugees and survivors to emigrate to Israel, where they were forced into contact with the dominant secular Zionist ideology they had previously perceived as inimical to religious life. In the early years of Israeli statehood, secular society, with its pioneering ethos, radiated an aura of moral superiority that challenged the religious to defend traditional Judaism. From this defensive position, haredim succeeded in constructing in Israel a vital and insular counter-culture with its own neighborhoods and institutions, within which its members developed a society defined in opposition to the secular Zionist vision, including its nominal embrace of women's equality. Rabbinical authorities invoke the biblical verse "*kol kevoda bat melekh penima*" [the king's daughter is all glorious within] (Psalms 45:14)⁴ to indicate the distinction between the traditional woman, whose ideal position is in the

El-Or notes that women's education is tolerated in haredi society as a concession to and reflection of reality; it is permitted only *a posteriori*. Even as haredim understand women's education to be part of their lives, they constantly examine its intentions (El-Or 1994: 75).

³ Schenirer was from a traditional family, but had been influenced by neo-Orthodox ideas while living in Vienna. She was disturbed by the failure of the religious leadership to speak to women. While remaining part of traditional society, Schenirer managed to break down the barriers to women's education. She established the first Bet Ya'akov school for women, and later a teacher's seminary around which literary, cultural, and creative educational activities developed. The Bet Ya'akov schools were taken over by Agudat Yisrael (at that time an ecumenical organization comprised of the neo-Orthodox, hasidic and *mitnagic* streams of European Orthodox Judaism). The schools pursued an educational program broader than some might have been aware, and through it modern culture flowed to traditional women, carrying with it, Friedman contends, a sense of dividedness and ambivalence (Friedman 1995: 276-80).

⁴ Translation from Grossman and Haut eds. 1992: xxi cited by Ner-David 2000: 63, 251n48. The JPS translation, stating that the Hebrew is uncertain, translates the passage: "The royal princess, her dress embroidered with golden mountings, is led inside to the king . . ."

private sphere “within” the home, and the modern secular woman, who seeks equality on all fronts, including public life (Ner-David 2000: 63; Friedman 1995: 273).

Paradoxically, in Friedman’s analysis, it was the impulse to insulate the community from secular influence that laid the groundwork for development of feminist perspectives within haredi life. Separate haredi institutions, supported by state funds, developed and expanded to accommodate new immigrants. These provided not only a relatively closed counter-culture but also employment opportunities for women. Going to Bet Ya’akov and then to a teacher’s seminary became a norm for haredi girls who, then, at a relatively young age, could expect to earn a government-provided teacher’s salary. Women’s central role in the economic life of the haredi family expanded as, in the 1950s, prominent haredi rabbis urged women to assume the demands of household management and paid work so that they might support a husband’s quest for spiritual completeness through extended study.⁵ Such study was consistent with the desire of haredim to shield the younger generation from their secular surroundings by helping young men to postpone or to avoid entirely military duty (Ben Gurion had agreed to draft deferral for yeshiva students). Leading haredi rabbis called upon young women to eschew the values of their “modern mothers,” who might be versed in European culture, in order to imitate their grandmothers. Yet as Friedman points out, women’s employment in the public sphere and important economic role sharpens the contradiction between traditional concepts of women’s ideal role and their actual activities within and without the haredi community.

On the one hand, women’s financial role in supporting the family has allowed haredi society to become even more insular as men spend extended periods of time in the *kollel* [school for advanced religious study], but on the other hand, current economic arrangements have transformed gender roles within the haredi family and community. Friedman questions the

⁵ Friedman cites a *midrashic* prooftext (Midrash Tanhuma, Pinhas 5) for division of labor, so that, within a family, both earthly needs and spiritual goals can be met. Jacob’s son Yissakhar was the scholar, while his brother Zebulun provided the scholar’s material support, but the profits of Torah study would be shared equally between them (Friedman 1995: 283-4, 289n15). He notes how *yeshivot* in Europe and Israel had used the principle of division of labor to explain their relationship to and gain support from non-Orthodox Jewish donors (Friedman 1991: 14, 48). Friedman directly attacks the “learners society”—the system of extended yeshiva study by men—as unviable economically in the long-term (Friedman 1991: viii).