

# [Growing Gender Issues within the Orthodox Community: A Psychohistorical Perspective](#)

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Development of Formal Jewish Education for Women in the Orthodox Community  
The issues surrounding the education and status of women have been universal over time and cultures. As late as 1868, the English parliament was debating whether women could own property. One of its statesmen announced the following, which was picked up by *The London Times*, “giving women the right to own property will destroy marriages and society as we know it” (Munday, 2012). This issue, incidentally, was resolved by the Torah thousands of years ago in the divine decision relayed by Moses to the five daughters of Zelophehad, giving them the right to own land (Num. 27:1-11). But the defining issue today for Orthodox women are the problems caused by their rise to the top of the educational ladder in both secular and religious studies. Their rise in status, by virtue of their professional achievements in the secular world, is well known. What is not as well known are their professional achievements in the religious world. In the last century, formalized Torah education for women began with the *Bais Yaakov* movement founded by Sarah Schnirer (1883-1935). This pioneer Jewish educator from Krakow, Poland felt the need to establish a structured school system for girls, which opened there in 1918 with 25 students. It later spread throughout Poland with a complete curriculum of Hebrew and secular studies. Of special interest was the formidable religious studies curriculum, which consisted of Tanakh (Bible) with commentaries, explanations of the liturgy, Dinim (laws), Jewish history, Hebrew language, Yiddish, and Jewish ethics and values. A

teachers' seminary sprang up later to train future women educators (M.M. Brayer, 1986, pp. 122-125). In America, the Bais Yaakov movement began in the Williamsburg section of New York City in 1937, when it came under the umbrella of the Agudath Israel movement and has since grown considerably throughout the country. An early supporter of Sarah Schnirer was the world-famous sage, Chofetz Chaim (1838-1932), who gave a pragmatic reason for the need to establish the Bais Yaakov schools: Formerly a woman lived in her father's home and was ensconced in Jewish tradition and followed the halakhot she observed there. In this home-oriented society there seemed to be no necessity of teaching a woman Torah; but in our mobile society, where women are no longer confined to the home and secular education is open to them, one should teach them Torah to prevent them from leaving Judaism and forgetting their traditional values. (M.M. Brayer, 1986, p. 129) If this was true of the Chofetz Chaim's generation in Europe, how much more so is it necessary in twenty-first century America, where assimilation and intermarriage are at an all-time high. This legacy of Torah scholarship for women that took root during that era has flowered into the advanced level of scholarship we witness today in America and Israel. Although there have always been exceptional women who had higher education, they were relatively few. Beruriah, wife of R. Meir (second century C.E.), Yalta, wife of R. Nahman bar Yaakov (fourth century C.E.), and the daughters of Rashi (eleventh century C.E.) are noteworthy examples (M.M. Brayer, 1986, pp. 156-160). Each came from prominent rabbinical families and their arranged marriages with leading rabbinical figures of their respective generations helped cement their deserved reputations. The story of Beruriah, in particular, is worthy of special mention. Her vast knowledge, character, and scholarly reputation rivaled that of her husband Rabbi Meir. She took issue with the talmudic statement that women are literally "simple-minded" (Da'atan Kalot) or better said "emotionally fragile." Her husband insisted that this statement was true. To prove his point, Rabbi Meir resorted to unbecoming actions that ultimately led to her death (Rashi, Avodah Zara18b). Although circumstances today are far more favorable for learned women, there nevertheless remains a deep-seated resistance to granting them a greater voice in religious affairs, as evidenced by the increased efforts to divide and separate the genders. Never in our history have there been so many highly learned Orthodox women in the scholarly text-based realm of Torah, Talmud, and halakha. In Israel we have an abundance of scholarly professional Orthodox women, heretofore unheard of in Jewish tradition: To'anot, professional women (advocates) who help in dealing with halakhic matters of divorce; Dayanot/Yo'atzot (Judges/Advisors) who make halakhic decisions on women's issues relating to family purity; Menahalot (Directors) of women's teacher seminaries such as Michlalah, Machon Gold, and so forth; and Women's yeshivot

(academies) such as Matan, Migdal Oz, and so forth. This virtual explosion of higher learning inevitably seeks an outlet in communal leadership in more proactive ways. As a result, we now find Orthodox women serving on community religious councils in Israel, a venue previously reserved only for men. In a recent column published in *The Jerusalem Post* (June, 2012, pp. 22–28) Rabbi Shlomo Riskin wrote, “Women’s greater involvement in Torah learning and teaching will produce different dimensions to the quality of Torah which is emerging.” Rabbi Riskin also reported, in an interview he had with the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, in which the Rebbe stated that “the greatest challenge facing Orthodox Jewry is the position of women in society and our halakhic response to a newly found acceptance of female equality within Western culture.” The Rebbe’s observation is indicative of one of the prime motivating factors behind this unprecedented growth. It is the rise of the Feminist Movement that began in the 1960s and that has propelled women’s issues to the forefront of Western culture. Under the leadership of Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, Bella Abzug, and other outspoken American Jewish feminists, this movement has impacted Modern Orthodox women’s thinking as well. A number of Orthodox women led by Blu Greenberg established the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA), which challenges traditional views about women’s participation in Jewish life cycle events and in religious services. In its wake came the emergence of separate Women’s Prayer Groups, which began to appear in larger Jewish communities around the country. These services gave well-educated Orthodox women an opportunity to practice their skills and to assume leadership positions in conducting their own services, hitherto only open to their male counterparts. Subsequently, other Orthodox women’s organizations and adult schools began to emerge. The formation of the American women’s adult school *Drisha* occurred in 1979, which as its Hebrew name indicates, involves inquiry into fairly advanced Hebrew religious texts. These new female-driven developments both here and in Israel pose a threat to the traditional hegemony of male Orthodox leadership. They are coming at a time when the American Orthodox rabbinate is also undergoing increased growth in numbers and influence. We therefore now turn our attention to tracking this Orthodox rabbinical growth pattern, and how it interfaces with the changes in status experienced by Orthodox women discussed above.

The Growing Empowerment of the Orthodox Rabbinate In the pre-Holocaust era, “parish” rabbis served the religious needs of American Jewry, serving in communities large and small scattered throughout the length and breadth of this great country. These local Orthodox rabbis were the posekim (decisors) of Jewish law as it applied primarily to ritual questions relating to prayer services, holiday observances, kashruth, marriage and divorce, and death and burial. Their influence in addressing broader social, economic, and political issues was quite

limited. The role of the rabbi was more insular, as he was tied to the religious needs of the local community. This is in stark contrast to the role of the Hassidic rebbe, who is viewed as a personal family mentor in all facets of life both secular and religious. The Hassidim were at that time a small minority within the Orthodox fold. After World War II this picture began to change dramatically. Orthodox communities gravitated to cities with large concentrations of Jews—Chicago, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, Los Angeles, and so forth. This movement was in no small measure a response to growing assimilation of American Jewry, especially in smaller far-flung communities. To counter this wave of assimilation, the Orthodox communities began to build Jewish Day Schools, which gained momentum in the 1940s. This centralization of Orthodox Jewry together with improved communication via the media allowed the Orthodox rabbinate to exert a wider sphere of influence on a national scale, especially in kashruth (kosher dietary) matters (for example, the Orthodox Union, and in Day School education—Torah uMesorah). Strong centralized rabbinic leadership represented greater security and safety not only in combating assimilation and intermarriage, but also in developing an intensive expanding educational system that would produce future Orthodox scholars and lay leaders. As a result, rabbinic bodies became stronger, larger, and more powerful in the lives of their constituents. Although numerically much smaller than the Conservative and Reform movements, the Orthodox are now the fastest growing of the four American religious denominations. In a recent population study The New York Times reported that of the 1.1 million Jews living in New York City, over 40 percent are Orthodox, a rise from 33 percent in 2002, a decade earlier, and that 74 percent of all Jewish children in the city are Orthodox (UJA Federation of New York, 2010). Considering that its ally is the powerful Orthodox rabbinic establishment of the State of Israel (which did not exist in the pre-Holocaust era), Orthodoxy has become a formidable presence today in the world Jewry. This population increase is due not only to the increased birth rate among Orthodox Jews, especially among the Hassidim, but also to the growing numbers of ba'alei teshuvah, disaffected young Jews seeking a more intensive expression of their Jewishness. There is a growing number of Orthodox outreach organizations and yeshivot. Internal Issues within Orthodoxy The challenge for expanding Orthodoxy is no longer external, survival in secular America, but internal, containing and bridging the widening divergence of ideology and practice within its ranks. On the left are the more liberal Modern Orthodox, and on the right are the proliferating Hareidi Orthodox. This ideological divide centers on their respective responses to modernity and to their attitudes toward the surrounding secular environment. Within this attitudinal diversity, there is a perceptible “sliding to the right” (S.C. Heilman, 2006) within centrist Orthodox ranks. As for the role of the local centrist

rabbi, he is seen more and more assuming the image of a “rebbe.” The Hassidic rebbe, by virtue of his exalted position, enjoys a special personal relationship with his Hassidim. This translates into the centrist rabbi now becoming more involved in many life issues of his congregants that previously were not part of his job description and for which he was not trained. He is now called upon as a consultant on business financial matters, occupational choices, personal family issues, parenting, sexual abuse, and the sundry societal problems afflicting our youth. Since clergy are often viewed unconsciously as parental figures, the new role of the rabbi as “super parent” induces their congregants to become more “childlike” in this relationship, which means less autonomy and more dependence. This slide to the right is not only apparent in the increasing empowerment of the rabbi, but more so in the intense impact Day School and yeshiva rebbes have in relationship to their students. As a result of their more right-wing education, this generation of students has become very visible today in the Orthodox community. One needs but visit a centrist Orthodox synagogue to observe a conformist trend, where the growing number of young men are garbed in their popular wide-brimmed black hats, black suits, and white shirts. This has come about because they attend Day Schools and yeshivot where the rebbes are recruited from the large pool of candidates available among the Hareidi Orthodox. These students comprise the future leadership of their respective congregations, which are moving in the same right wing direction in which their yeshiva rebbes were educated. This direction embodies a more insular approach to Judaism than that which was experienced by their parents. This rebbe-talmid (teacher-student) model is similar to that of the rebbe-Hassid relationship reflecting a more exclusionist outlook toward Jewish and secular life. Into this more insular social and religious milieu, we now find the learned accomplished Orthodox woman seeking greater acceptance and participation in what were previously traditional male roles. To understand the underlying tension between these two movements: aspiring highly educated Orthodox women and the right-leaning Orthodox leadership, we need to examine group psychodynamics in their way of thinking as well as in action. In so doing we can better anticipate what lies ahead between these two contending groups. We are taught in Pirke Avot (4:1), “who is wise, one who learns from everyone.” Whereas Sigmund Freud is viewed as hostile to religion, his psychological insights into the workings of groups termed “groupthink” can nevertheless be instructive in analyzing our subject. One of people’s most basic needs is to belong. As a result, people will attach themselves to one or more persons. They receive satisfaction from belonging and being part of the group. The human tendency pushes us to connection with and acceptance by others. One of the difficulties that people anticipate is the fear of loss of love from others in the group. People will,

therefore, conform to the group ethos at all costs. As Freud puts it, An individual forming part of a group acquires solely from numeric considerations, a sentiment of invincible power which allows him to yield to instincts, which had he been alone he would perforce had kept under restraint...We know today that by various processes an individual may be brought into such a condition that having entirely lost his conscious personality he obeys the suggestions of the operator (leader) and commits acts in utter contradiction to his character and habits. (Freud. Vol. 18, pp. 67f) Freud argues that there is a contagion of affect in groups. This is best demonstrated at organized sports games, where the enthusiasm and identification with the winner is seen in clothing identifying with the team and other external signs. This enthusiasm and affect help keep the group cohesive. The downside of this is that group thinking predominates and critical thinking is suspended. This allows the leadership to deliver an edict and there is no questioning or critical thinking regarding something that as individuals may not be acceptable. The power of the leader and the group as a whole is strong enough that to experience being excluded from the group is viewed as punishment and inclusion as reward. Freud lists the army and the church as prime examples of this theory. How do these Freudian insights help illuminate the sources of tension building up in the Orthodox community over the changing status of women? They help explain the psychological causes behind this mentality of "groupthink," and how this in turn fosters greater conformity, dependency, and compliance with the leaders' views. These traits of conformity, compliance, and dependence may not be discerned at first. Over time, however, in order to feel accepted by the religious community the person eventually "falls in line." Dissent and individualism place one on the fringe of the group at best, and rejected at worst. In Freudian terminology, the leader's demands bypass the person's superego, i.e. conscience, in the interest of group unity. Groupthink has enabled rabbinic bodies to issue various edicts or humrot (restrictions) designed to further separate the sexes not only at religious services and functions, but also at organizational dinners, lectures, and social functions. The separation of the sexes at religious services has always been the Orthodox model. However, these new humrot exceed normative Orthodox practice that existed in pre-Holocaust America. It may be argued that they are even more stringent than what was observed in most Orthodox communities in pre-Holocaust Europe. This groupthink, however, is regressive because it takes well-educated Orthodox adults and puts them into a childlike role of accepting the arbitrary paternalistic authority represented by Orthodox leadership. The success of these efforts in groupthink finds some Orthodox women not only complying with these segregationist measures, but also abetting them by censoring those individualist women who may think and act differently. In a recent gathering (Asifah) of

thousands of Orthodox men concerning issues relating to the use of the Internet, an interviewer asked several men why they were there. They answered in kind, "We cannot seem to control ourselves, so we came to get the rabbi's guidance to help control our behavior." This is another example of groupthink, where one's behavior is controlled by the leader, rather than determined by one's own free will. Noted psychoanalyst, Eric Fromm, in his discussion of humanistic versus authoritarian ethics provides another psychological source bearing on our subject. In analyzing the concept of authority, he distinguishes between rational and irrational authority. In speaking of the empowerment of the Orthodox leadership, to what kind of authority are we referring, rational or irrational? According to Fromm, irrational authority always seeks power over people, which can either be physical or mental. It is built upon fear because criticism of the authority figure is forbidden. Rational authority, on the other hand, is based on equality of both authority and subject, who differ only in the degree of knowledge and skill in a particular field. Authority on rational grounds is not intimidating and does not call for irrational awe. Rational authority not only permits but also requires constant scrutiny of those subjected to it (E. Fromm, 1942). Rational authority in our case, would allow for Orthodox leadership to adjust to the changing status of women rather than distancing and dividing them from the rest of the community. There is no need for a display of power and control by issuing arbitrary edicts such as we see in the following cases. A number of years ago a Lashon haRa (gossip) campaign targeting women swept the Orthodox community. The women were given stickers to affix to their phones reminding them not to use this means for speaking Lashon haRa. Men apparently are not suspected of violating this restriction! Another campaign directed toward women is the importance of observing higher standards of tseniyut (modesty). It is argued that some of the moral failings of Orthodox men are caused by women's lack of tseniyut observance. A recent event occurred that illustrates the "progress" of this trend of regressive actions toward women. In 2012, in a large Orthodox community a number of unfortunate events occurred, such as severe accidents, premature illnesses, and sudden deaths. In response to these events a community meeting was called for women with the expectation that it would emphasize the reciting of Tehillim. Several inspirational speakers were invited who would offer comfort to a shaken community. The first male speaker declared that these unfortunate events occurred because women had not adhered sufficiently to the Orthodox tseniyut dress code. The solution presented was for women to become more aware of appropriate modesty, which would help prevent further disasters. A female speaker then offered a more "creative" solution. Each woman upon leaving the meeting was advised to go home and search for a garment that is not tseniyut and discard it. Though it may appear comical to believe that the

unfortunate events and the solutions offered had any logic, it certainly demonstrates the psychology and power of groupthink. It also betrays an unconscious fear of the perceived power of women. It shows a tendency to concern oneself with externals such as what we wear, rather than to search internally for ethical and moral failings that apply to both men and women. A number of years ago, I attended an international conference for Orthodox mental health professionals. The theme of a major seminar was "What is happening to Orthodox youth once they attend college?" The two main speakers were very experienced Orthodox professionals. One was the Hillel director of an Ivy League College. The other was the female director (PhD) of an accredited Orthodox women's college. Each related stories of students who had completed 12 years of Day School education prior to their admission to college. The male director bemoaned the fact that a number of Orthodox students had "forgotten" to bring their tefillin with them to college, did not attend the minyan, and were even seen eating at McDonald's. He also reported questioning students about a hypothetical case involving cheating on a final exam. Of the religious denominations he questioned, the Orthodox students scored lowest in ethical behavior. The female director of the Orthodox women's college then spoke about her interviews with Day School graduates applying for admission. Many reported negatively about their previous seminary and Day School experiences, specifically citing their frustrations when asking challenging religious questions. Some complained that teachers were more concerned with externals such as the length of their skirts and the color of their shoes than with their inner spiritual growth. At this point many of the women in the audience spontaneously arose and applauded enthusiastically because they felt, for the first time, someone had validated their own personal experiences. Although these reports were difficult to hear, one would have expected that mental health professionals and clergy in attendance would have taken this as a "wake-up call" to look for ways of addressing these issues. Much to my surprise, the following morning the woman speaker received a verbal reprimand by the conference authorities for her views, unlike the male speaker whose observations on Day School education were even more damaging. Ironically, the next day's speaker, a rabbi of note, reported about his recent trip to Israel, where he had rushed to prevent his daughter's expulsion from a seminary for asking too many challenging questions relating to faith. It was disturbing to observe the disproportionate anger directed at the female director, instead of addressing the underlying issue, which is the failure of Day School students to internalize Orthodox religious values. The Day Schools are very successful in teaching texts and rituals to those who remain within the protective environment of the system. However, after they graduate and move on to college, it is apparent that many have not mastered the internal religious



discipline needed to adjust to a challenging, secular environment. The discriminatory reaction of the establishment in this episode is further evidence of the growing tension of these two parallel movements, that is, the changing status of women and the implied threat to male leadership. The question persists, how is it, at a time when the status of Orthodox women has risen to unprecedented heights in both secular and religious life that we are witnessing these new regressive actions? As in the previous discussion based on group psychodynamics, here too we may profit from viewing the problem from a psychological perspective. Traditionally, Orthodox leadership was male-dominated primarily because men were the most educated. They therefore are experiencing the change of status of Orthodox women today as a narcissistic injury because they experience it as taking away from, or interfering with their identity as religious leaders. This destabilizing effect upon Orthodox leadership is felt on both a personal and communal level. The male experiences the change in women's status as an attack on his sense of self and identity. To redress this narcissistic injury requires an immediate response in order to reestablish his sense of value, self-esteem, and equilibrium. The way to do this is apparently to return the status of both men and women to an earlier time and space. Given the growing empowerment of the new rebbe-model in Orthodox life sustained by the groupthink mentality of the laity, these newly instituted edicts represent attempts to redress perceived rabbinical power losses caused by the rise of women's stature in religious life as will be illustrated in the following timeline chart. These restrictions are not merely random symptoms of a "sliding to the right," but their chronological and psychological pattern betrays a reactionary policy undeserved by our accomplished women. The following is a partial chronological list of Orthodox women's professional/educational accomplishments since the 1970s.

**Timeline of the Rise of Orthodox Women's Stature in Educational/Religious Life**

- 1970s • Earlier graduates of Orthodox women's colleges and teacher seminaries, such as Stern College in New York and Machon Gold and Michlalah in Israel, assume positions in Jewish life in America and in Israel.
- 1976 • Midreshet Lindenbaum, women's Talmud study movement in Israel (originally Michlelet Bruria founded by Rabbi Chaim Brovender)
- 1979 • Establishment of Drisha Institute in New York • Establishment of Matan women's yeshiva in Jerusalem
- 1980s • Increased Bat Mitzvah celebrations for Orthodox girls • Introduction of separate women's Orthodox prayer groups
- 1986 • Eshel-Sephardic School for Orthodox Women established in Israel • Midreshet Ein Hanatziv, an Orthodox Women's college, established by Kibbutz Hadati
- 1988 • Women begin serving on Israeli Religious Councils.
- 1990s • Rabbi S. Riskin of Ohr Torah Stone spearheads movement to establish a school for To'anot (female rabbinical advocates) dealing with women's halakhic issues
- 1997 • Nishmat, Torah study center for women

begins to train Yo'atzot (female halakhic advisors) regarding Niddah (laws of Jewish family purity) • Beginning of J.O.F.A. (Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance) in America • Migdal Oz, a women's Bet Midrash, established in Israel 1998 • Machon L'Parnasah - Orthodox women's college established by Touro College in New York 2009 • Sara Hurwitz receives ordination from Rabbi Avi Weiss of Hebrew Institute of Riverdale New York as a "Maharat" • Rabbi Weiss opens Yeshivat Maharat in New York

The following is a partial list of various edicts/restrictions enacted by some of the male Orthodox leadership targeting women from 1970s to the present. Whereas these may not reflect the views of many centrist Orthodox rabbis, they are included because the general rightward drift of the Orthodox movement.

Measures Taken by Orthodox Leadership to Distance/Separate Men and Women

- Greater pressure on women to observe more strictly the laws of tseniyut, with less pressure on males to exert self-control
- Introduction of separate seating for Orthodox women at non-religious functions, such as congregational banquets, lectures, and social events
- More and more congregational/organizational shiurim (classes) designed separately for men and women
- Mehitzot increasingly being erected on the dance floor at weddings to separate men and women
- Kiddush celebrations following services increasingly being separated for men and women
- National Orthodox organizations press for the closing of separate Orthodox women's prayer groups because "it divides the family." (See 1980s on women's list)
- After the first graduating class of To'anot, Israeli rabbinate protested that women are entering an exclusive male space. The following year the To'anot exam was made unusually difficult to prevent further women graduates from entering the field. The Israeli Civil High Court of Justice condemned the rabbinate's exclusionary policy (see 1990s in women's list)
- National Orthodox rabbinic organizations protest granting of Semikha (ordination) to women and censure Rabbi Avi Weiss for his actions (see 2009 in Women's list).

The following extreme measures are characteristic of some Hareidi communities both in America and Israel.

- Signs warning women to observe strictly the laws of tseniyut
- Separate entrances for men and women entering into Orthodox buildings
- Separate entrances for men and women entering private homes hosting a public celebration or religious simha
- Separate shopping hours for men and women in certain upstate New York stores
- Separate sidewalks for men and women
- Women instructed to sit in the back of public buses in certain neighborhoods in New York and Israel
- Male relatives, including fathers and grandfathers, are not invited to attend graduations, plays, and even Siddur presentations (1st grade) in certain girl's schools.

Conclusion The beauty of halakha is its adaptability to meet the changing needs of the Jewish people. In less than a century since the advent of formal Jewish education for girls via the Bais Yaakov movement in the beginning of the twentieth century, education for

Orthodox Jewish girls and women has reached unprecedented heights in quantity and quality. Orthodox women have established a vast network of schools of higher learning and organizations to sustain this movement. They have reached a stage where they are seeking opportunities for greater positions of leadership, within the framework of halakha that befits their newly won status in Orthodox life. Their motivation is generated by a sincere need to express their deep commitment to God and to religious life. There are enough examples to show where halakha, in the past, has been sensitive to the special needs of women and has adapted accordingly (M.M. Brayer, 1986, p. 152). Moreover, as early as the eleventh century, Jewish women in Franco-Germany demanded the privilege to perform mitzvot (religious commandments) from which they are exempt if they choose to do so on their own, and Rabbi Yitzhak Halevi (one of Rashi's teachers) permitted them to do so (Siddur Rashi, 1912, p. 127). However, we are currently seeing in Orthodox leadership a regressive divisive tendency via various edicts that further separate women from their families and from normal social interactions. Although one may consider the occurrence of these new restrictions as mere coincidence, their timing precisely during the decades of women's greatest achievement in attaining professional leadership positions in the religious community, draws one to the inescapable conclusion that a causal relationship exists between women's actions and establishment's reactions. This is causing a growing internal division within an otherwise expanding successful movement. This division arises more from human frailty, than from purely religious considerations. They derive from fear of loss of power in religio-political terms or from feelings of narcissistic injury in psychological terms. This perceived loss could be overcome if we but learn to accept and even embrace this rise in women's stature in a spirit of greater unity. In so doing our Orthodox leadership can find the creative means to do this within the framework of halakha.

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