

Understanding Women's Roles In Orthodox Judaism

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Introduction

As young Jewish women attending a secular private school in New York City, we became aware of the lack of understanding of the Orthodox Jewish community. Judaism is an important part of both of our identities, and we wanted to understand other Jewish customs and ways of practicing Judaism. In particular, we were interested in the role of women in Orthodox Judaism and the experience of being an observant woman in modern society. Through this project, we wanted to develop a deeper understanding and dismantle the misconceptions we held ourselves, and see as sometimes present in our communities, around Orthodox Judaism. In order to do this, we realized we had to approach this study by speaking to individuals and hearing about all aspects of their lives in order to understand what it means to be a woman within Orthodox Judaism. We chose to conduct interviews with observant women as well as those who identify as Reform, to gain various perspectives and be able to look at different views in conversation with each other. In conducting our research, we came to understand the complexities of observant women's roles and beliefs. Although we were able to identify common themes and phrases, we recognize the experiences and views are diverse and can not be generalized in a single answer. We realized that the perception of whether separate and defined gender roles, which are common in Orthodox Judaism, can be equal is varied based on observance and personal experience.

Methodology

In order to understand the perspective of real people, rather than only research sources, we conducted all of our research through interviews. The final product of this essay consists of quotes, information and analysis of those interviews. The only additional sources used were to find background information and to develop a basic understanding of Jewish Law. These additional sources were used so that during interviews we would be able to better understand the terminology and rules referenced by the women we spoke with. In total, we interviewed nine women, five who identify in some way as “Observant” or “Orthodox” and four who identify as “Reform.” Throughout our paper, we use the terms Orthodox and Observant as umbrella terms encompassing “Observant,” “Modern Yeshivish,” “Traditional Orthodox,” and “Vanilla Orthodox,” but excluding “Modern Orthodox” and “Ultra Orthodox.” Interviews lasted between half an hour and an hour, although most were closer to an hour in length. They were all conducted either in person or over facetime and we met the subjects through word of mouth and personal connections. After our first two interviews, we prefaced our conversations with an explanation of our project in the hopes that the women would understand our intentions and know we were not seeking a specific answer. The women were all asked an identical set of questions, however, as we began to see common themes we edited our questions to encompass and reflect those ideas. This meant that our first interview had different questions from our last interview but the questions asked of Reform women were not different from those asked of Orthodox women. The questions asked were:

1. What sect of Judaism do you identify with?
 - a. What does this mean to you?

- b. What do you see as the differences from (their answer) and other sects of Judaism?
 - c. Do you have questions or thoughts about other sects of Judaism?
2. What sect of Judaism were you raised within?
 - a. Do you still participate in that sect?
3. What does Judaism mean to you?
 - a. How did this evolve as you got older?
 - b. Is there a specific aspect of your Jewish identity that is particularly important to you?
4. Does Judaism impact your daily life?
 - a. Is that typical of women in your community?
 - b. If not: What would you describe as the difference from your life and what might be typical of your community?
5. Does being a woman shape your Jewish identity?
6. If your comfortable answering this, and if not don't worry about it... What role does sexuality play in Jewish life and religion?¹
7. Can you describe what being a woman in your synagogue means?
 - a. Is this different from religious practices at home?
8. Is it every a challenge to balance the traditional gender roles from your religious tradition with the gender roles that you experience in the modern world?
 - a. Are there any specific times or experiences that reflect this?
9. Are there examples of when your identity as a woman in American society come into conflict with your identity as a woman in your religious tradition?
10. Do you ever feel that being religious has impacted your career?
11. Is there anything else you think we should know?

We had a few additional questions that we asked if we felt they pertained to the specific interview we were conducting.

- Are the choices you make regarding media and technology exposure ever driven by religion?
- How has where you've gone to school impacted your relationship to Judaism now? Does that have an impact on where you chose to send your kids to school?
- Is there any particular reason that you chose to wear a scarf/wig and not a wig/scarf?

Not all women had an answer to each question and their answers are mixed throughout this paper into different categories, based on the themes and ideas they relate to.

¹ In some interviews we chose not to ask question 6 either because of how the interview was going or because of our relationship to the interviewee.

Assumptions and Misconceptions

Practices of Judaism as well as understandings and perspectives of Jewish religion and values greatly differ across observancy. Many women interviewed discussed a desire for conversation among Jews with different perspectives and beliefs. R.K. (Orthodox) expresses wanting understanding across observancy when she says there is a “degree of acceptance among the denominations that I wish could be more global.” G.D. (Orthodox) echoes the desire for “more dialogue” and explains that “it doesn’t feel good to worry that people are judging you,” when there is not an attempt to understand the varying opinions and practices of Judaism.

Unfortunately, sometimes views are so divergent that conversation is stifled. These conflicting views make discussions “a very difficult bridge to cross which breeds a lot of hostility” (H.B.). R.K. shared that there are “some things I just don’t think I’ll ever really understand,” which is similarly expressed by E.C. (Reform) when she says there are “so many beliefs that I just fundamentally disagree with.” The idea that beliefs and ideals held by some Jews are not fathomable to others is shared across observancy, signifying the challenge in approaching a discussion where opinions are so different. Although many of the women interviewed are knowledgeable about other forms of Judaism, there are also women who are “not that familiar” with different sects of Judaism (A.F.). This lack of understanding also contributes to the formation of misconceptions between Jewish communities. As an Orthodox Jew living in the South, S.O. (Orthodox) experiences judgement from both Jews and non-Jews in her community, and feels there is an absence of “people just having knowledge of what observance is.” Unawareness of “the nuances of observance” prompts the development of “so many misconceptions in both directions,” and hinders the ability to communicate (A.F., G.D.).

Choice and Classifications

What it means to be a religious Jew has a wide range of definitions. There are many Jews who do not include the religious aspects of Judaism in their practice, but maintain a culturally Jewish life. This wide spectrum of religiousness was brought up multiple times in interviews, particularly by Orthodox women. They explained that while people tend to think there are clear cut sects of Judaism, in actuality, “everyone practices a little differently” (A.F.). However, it is notable that the Reform Jews interviewed were adamant in their assertion that they identify as Reform and provided no alternative terminology while almost every woman who would likely be labeled as Orthodox by secular society had a different identifier ranging from “Modern Yeshivish” to “Observant” to “Vanilla Orthodox” (A.F., S.O., R.K.). Their different terms reflect the complexities of being an observant Jew and the fact that “there’s not one Orthodox community” where everyone follows a particular “monolith” (A.F., G.D.). Furthermore, asking women to self identify brought up the desire for unity, not only across all Jewish communities, but also specifically within Orthodoxy. Many Orthodox women spoke about the idea that “there is more that unites us than divides us” (S.O.). This concept is summed up by G.D.’s (Orthodox) casual but relevant assertion that “we all jews.” Labels of any type tend to separate people into limiting categories. Almost all of the observant women spoken to stressed the importance of acknowledging the fluidity possible within Judaism while understanding that “sometimes we need [labels] to provide context” (S.O.).

While more observant women tended to focus on the individuality of each person’s practice of Judaism, Reform women emphasized how they assert their Jewishness and maintain a Jewish life within secular communities where Judaism does not have as obvious a presence in

daily life. When living abroad in Hong Kong, where the Jewish community is drastically smaller than New York's, H.B. (Reform) realized that "if I want to be Jewish here I really have to try." H.B. realized that being Jewish would not be part of her life if she did not actively choose to be Jewish. While the less observant women interviewed live in disproportionately Jewish communities, they still recognize that blindly following "the examples of my parents and my grandparents" is not enough to maintain a strong Jewish identity (L.C.). To develop a personal and meaningful relationship with Judaism, it is essential to actively make choices about Jewish practice and beliefs. While Judaism is inherited through family and culture, determining the nuances of one's Jewishness is an ongoing and "active decision" across levels of observance (E.C.).

Representing and Defining Jewishness

Jewishness is an important part of the individual identity of most of the women interviewed. E.C. (Reform) described the importance of being Jewish to her identity when she says, “I don’t put American first and I don’t put New Yorker, first I am a [Reform] Jewish woman.” E.C. further explained, “Being Jewish is my identity, it’s the one I choose” indicating it is an active choice to develop her identity as a Jewish woman. R.K. (Orthodox) also considers her Judaism to be at the forefront of her identity and explained that she is “being an Orthodox Jew as an Orthodox Jew,” and not as a “lawyer or a doctor.” Being Orthodox is what drives her choices and lifestyle, making it a significant part of how she defines herself. S.G. (Reform) defined her Judaism as her ethnicity and stated, “it’s not Polish or Eastern European.” She also spoke about the connection she feels to the history of the Jewish people and how it influences her values and how she chooses to live her life.

Judaism is a defining part of these women’s identities which sometimes leads to feeling responsible for presenting a positive image of Jewish people. Within secular settings, A.F. (Orthodox) feels she has to be the “representative for or of Orthodoxy” and has to dismantle the negative stereotypes associated with damaging news stories about Orthodox Jews. Most of the women interviewed explained that there are often “things that you have to explain to people” around “the nuances” in different sects, especially Orthodox Judaism (E.C., A.F.). In communities such as secular schools and work, S.G. and E.C. feel they are often labeled as the “Jew in the room” and “the token Jewish girl.” Some believe that by representing the Jewish community, they have an opportunity to be a “light and inspiration” to the world by acting as a

model citizen. However, others feel it negatively affects their life and their Jewishness is “blown out of proportion because it’s something that matters to me” (S.O., E.C.).

Specifically in more observant Judaism, there are physical factors that suggest someone is Jewish. The Orthodox women interviewed described that being noticeably Jewish means they’re “going to be looked at a certain way” and creates a pressure to “make sure I act respectfully” (S.O.). Especially living in North Carolina where the Jewish community is small and fairly isolated, S.O. (Orthodox) often feels that she constantly has to be representing what it means to be a Jew. M.S. (Orthodox) told a story of an Orthodox rabbi on a plane who felt he needed to clean up a dirty bathroom and leave it cleaner than it had been when he entered it. He was aware of his physical traits suggesting he was Jewish and did not want people to think a Jew had left the bathroom dirty. The rabbi’s need to leave a positive impression of Jewish people, is similarly reflected in the Orthodox women spoken to’s awareness of how their actions are perceived because of their physical embodiment of their religion.

Change and Social Justice

One of the clearest divides between the less and more observant women interviewed is the issue of change. Most of the self-identified Reform Jews spoke of the need to evolve with the broader world, where as many of the Orthodox women felt maintaining traditional Jewish customs and laws is important. As M.S. (Orthodox) explained, there is a “divide over adaptability” and that less observant Jews are “willing to change in a bigger way than I would be able to change.” This idea of change came up in two different ways when talking with Orthodox women. As G.D. (Orthodox) explained, “one dividing issue is involvement with the modern world.” As observancy intensifies, the distance from broader society also becomes greater. A.F. (Orthodox) brought up this idea when she said, “Modern orthodox [is] more integrated into norms of general society” whereas traditional Orthodox communities, which she belongs to, is more removed and Ultra-Orthodox is almost completely isolated from modern society. Involvement with the broader world was brought up by many of the Orthodox women, but not many of the less observant women who are all either students or teachers at a secular school.

Despite their sect, almost all women interviewed brought up the idea of Judaism serving as a connector to the past. L.C. (Reform) explained that an important part of her Jewish identity is the longevity of Jewish traditions and a connection to her family. H.B. (Reform) raised a similar idea explaining that Judaism “means a very deep connection to my family's history and lineage.” The idea of tradition and past is also significant in more observant Judaism. However, it is usually refers to the observance of Jewish law rather than being a connection to family. A.F. explained that for her, Orthodoxy is “hopefully as close to whatever the original [form of Judaism] was.” Striving for a lifestyle and belief system similar to the past creates a rift between

levels of observance. E.C. (Reform) proclaimed, “Reform Jews make their own rules” representing how Reform Judaism places a higher value on change. E.C. added, the “ability to take lessons and stories from years and years ago and know that it’s not all true now” is a significant part of her Jewishness. L.C. also brought up the idea of embracing change when she stated that, “personally I think it’s important to embrace the world around you” and that “it’s really important to evolve instead of just practicing what your ancestors have and what you have always known.” While Reform Judaism embraces change, Orthodox Judaism sees much slower change if any. When speaking about her Orthodox community, M.S. explained that “change happens just less and it infiltrates our community more slowly.” The conflicting views on changing Jewish practice as modern society evolves is evident and is a source of division between levels of observances.

This concept of a willingness to change plays out in many different ways. One of the most prominent in conversations with women of different sects of Judaism was the idea of Social Justice. Social Justice is one of the central tenets of Reform Judaism and is an idea that was expressed in some capacity by all the Reform women spoken to. For H.B. (Reform) not only is Social Justice an important part of her observance, but a key part of what defines the Reform Movement. To H.B., Reform Judaism is a “deep connection to social justice and social action.” E.C. and S.G. (Reform) do not include social justice as part of their definitions of Reform Judaism, but they do echo the belief in “social justice” and the importance of using Jewish values to participate in social action (E.C.).

These same ideas were brought up by Orthodox women. However, the contrast between the two is evident. While Reform women see their religion as a pathway to their Social Justice

work, many of the Orthodox women defended how they “certainly don’t want [themselves] or [their] family going backwards” (A.F.). These women expressed the specific ways in which they are supporters of social action and how traditional religion and social justice are not mutually exclusive. These actions include visiting hospitals, supporting older “lonely” women in the community, and being “a proponent of gender equality” (M.S., A.F.). Social Justice work is a manifestation of the conflict within the Jewish community surrounding involvement with secular society. For Orthodox women, the idea of social justice highlights the importance of involving with greater communities, but exacerbates the challenges of maintaining a traditional society.

Jewish Culture and Jewish Religion

The wide spectrum of observance within Judaism, reflects the variety of meaning and purpose. For example, to some, Judaism is a cultural identity. According to L.C. (Reform), Judaism is “more about following traditions than embracing it as a way of life.” The idea that Judaism is more cultural than spiritual is repeated by S.G. (Reform) and H.B. (Reform), the latter of whom adds that she approaches Jewish texts from “an intellectual and scholarly place.” H.B. acknowledges the different understanding of Judaism and Jewish texts in particular when she says, “I imagine that the emphasis on *halaha*² and the daily keeping of Jewish life is much more important [to other sects].” The obligation to follow *halaha* in Orthodox Judaism is accompanied by the idea that Judaism is a “relationship with G-d” (R.K.). G.D. (Orthodox) and M.S. (Orthodox), believe that “G-d wrote the Torah” and M.S. says, “it gives us a way to behave in every situation.” Their relationship to Judaism is based on the Torah being an “instruction book” given by G-d that serves as a guide for how to live their lives, influencing everything from daily activities to moral values (S.O.). S.O. (Orthodox) also states that by being Jewish, she is being “a bearer of a message that was given to [them] by G-d,” and the *mitzvot*³ and laws in Judaism have a purpose. Regulations that are observed in Orthodox Judaism, while meaningful for many Jews, also have a negative and limiting impact on others. A.F. (Orthodox) explains how these rules can impact women differently than men, but how for her, believing in G-d and other aspects of Orthodoxy sustains a meaningful understanding of observance:

Encompassing all of Orthodox Jewish life is the idea that learning Torah is of paramount importance; it usually trumps everything else. Women are not required

² The Hebrew word for Jewish law based on the Talmud.

³ The Hebrew term *mitzvah* (plural: *mitzvot*) translates to means “commandment.” The term refers to any of the 613 “commandments” in the Torah. *Mitzvah/mitzvot* can also refer to a good deed.

to learn Torah, and as mentioned before, are discouraged from learning. When one is excluded from the most important part of orthodoxy, naturally one can't help but feel marginalized. So come *Simchat Torah*⁴, what is there for the woman to celebrate? The men dance with the Torah, but what should women do? Come *Purim*⁵, teenage boys and go out to collect charity and get drunk, but that would be immodest for teenage girls so they stay home and maybe help cook the celebratory meal instead. Only men read from the Torah on *Shabbos*, only men are required to pray three times a day at the synagogue. Only men leave home every night to attend Torah lectures or study for a few hours. Women are meant to stay home with the kids. A single woman with no kids is likely made to feel that she has no purpose in life...It's kind of complicated. 1) I grew up this way, so I'm used to it as I have never lived any other way. 2) I try not to think about it too much. 3) Not all of what I experience is really inherent to Judaism itself; some of the attitudes and practices that belittle women developed later. For instance, originally, women were called up to read a portion from the Torah, but the Rabbis put a stop to it at some point because some men were illiterate, and it would shame them to have women show them up in this way. Ultimately, Orthodox Judaism is a package deal. Complete adherence to all the laws and customs is demanded from all members of the faith. If people were allowed to pick the parts that appealed to them and discard the rest, there would be no strong, cohesive religion to bind all members. As it is now, Orthodox Judaism comes in a multitude of flavors. If all Orthodox Jews would jettison the parts of their religion that did not appeal to them, Orthodoxy would just crumble into thousands of little bits and then disintegrate entirely. I may not appreciate all facets of current praxis, but there are many positive aspects to Orthodox Judaism and I choose to focus on those.

A.F. describes how women are not included in one of the most important aspects of Judaism; studying and reading the Torah. Women's absence in the service leads A.F. to feeling as though there is nothing to celebrate women for during *Simchat Torah*. According to A.F., a woman's place in the synagogue and around the Torah is essentially non-existent, and that leaves them to claim the role of a mother and keeper of the house instead. While this role empowers some women, the exclusion of women makes some feel "marginalized" and is a conflicting and

⁴ The Jewish festival marking the completion of reading the Torah and the beginning of a new cycle. This is celebrated by rolling out the Torah, and dancing and singing around the scroll.

⁵ The Jewish festival celebrating Jews being saved from the evil Haman's plot to kill them. Among other traditions, Purim is observed by reading from the Megillah, giving out gift bags, and giving money to charities.

frustrating part of Orthodoxy (A.F.). Even though A.F. sees women's role in Orthodox Judaism as flawed, she finds meaning in other aspects of Orthodoxy, and accepts all parts of Orthodox Judaism as a "package deal." She prioritizes the strength of a unified people through religion over the practices and laws in Judaism that she does not value.

The source of meaning in Judaism varies throughout the Jewish community. Many of the observant women interviewed explained that Judaism "brings a lot of meaning," especially to everyday life (G.D.). For G.D. the effect Judaism has on daily lives through *mitzvot* and traditions bring "cosmic goodness to the world." M.S., echoes this idea when she explains that Jewish rules and customs "[take] the world and [elevate] it to something spiritual," and for S.O. (Orthodox), it "is a physical connection to a spiritual pathway." For these women, Judaism makes everyday life filled with "holiness and goodness" and incorporates spirituality and G-d into their lives. M.S. also spoke about how she is striving to be "perfect" and Jewish values and actions guide her. H.B. similarly said, "Judaism is the place I look to for ethical guidance." For H.B., Judaism also serves as an "amazing tradition about thinking about really big questions." The stories, texts, and complex history of the Jewish people lead to meaning through the ideas and values in Judaism. L.C. says that as she got older, she "developed an awareness of what it means for [her] to be Jewish and what it means for the people around [her] to be Jewish." Doing the thinking of "why" creates a purpose and personal connection to Judaism.

While Judaism serves as a source of suggestions of moral guidance, some Jews' belief that G-d wrote the Torah leads to the acceptance and absolute trust in Jewish law. G.D. explains that when she says "G-d," she is "talking about the creator of everything." Although G.D. acknowledges that some laws, especially those around gender roles, may seem unfair, "if you

believe that the G-d who created Fairness with a capital F, the concept of Justice and goodness, also wrote these laws, then you kind of approach them with a little humility.” Part of Orthodoxy for G.D. is trying to find meaning in rules that initially do not make sense to her. She asks, “Why would G-d have made these rules? Why would G-d have wanted to separate the genders?” When it comes to gender roles, she has come to the conclusion that, “It's pretty obvious why. Because [men and women] get up to no good when they're together” in the “misogynistic” secular world (G.D.).

Community Norms

Community is one of the greatest driving forces of Judaism, and impacts the lives of Jewish women across observancy. However, how community impacts their lives greatly differs. The Jewish community, in its broadest sense, connects people not only through a common religion but also a common culture and tradition. E.C. (Reform) described feeling “very one with other Jews.” This sense of oneness also relates to R.K.’s (Orthodox), idea of a “Jewish bubble.” This “bubble” seems to apply differently depending on observancy. R.K., who is observant, moves predominantly in Jewish communities that are particularly Orthodox, creating a much tighter bubble. However, L.C. (Reform) spoke of how her practice of Judaism is largely reflected by the Jewish community at her secular school. While during her day to day life she is surrounded by many non-Jewish people, the Jewish community she belongs to is defined by the specific “Jewish bubble” she exists in. H.B. (Reform) spoke of the importance of “being a part of a community where people are taking care of one another” and L.C. described her Jewishness as a “big part of what connects me to other generations and sides of my family.” All of these reform women spoke of togetherness and connections to others as significant parts of a Jewish community. Rather than the emphasis on the laws of Judaism, their focus is on “being with people and being together” (E.C.).

The ideal of a strong Jewish community is important across observancy, but how that community functions and looks is drastically different for Orthodox women. For many, the strong sense of unity in the Orthodox community is one of its biggest draws. G.D. (Orthodox), who grew up as a secular Jew in suburban Georgia, “saw the warmth of the Orthodox Community” when studying at Hebrew University in Israel. She was drawn to the community,

and became more observant as a result. A.F. (Orthodox) also spoke of how “community driven” Orthodoxy is and R.K. discussed drawing “into the faith system and my community.”

For all these women, community is one of Orthodoxy’s strongest assets.

However, many of these women also brought up the idea that some of the rules and traditions of Orthodoxy are dictated by the cultural norms in a traditional community rather than Jewish law. Many of the traditions that are viewed as demeaning women by those outside Orthodoxy are not actually concepts prescribed by Jewish law. Instead, these customs stem from long standing tradition and culture that changes incredibly slowly when compared to secular society. R.K., who is Orthodox, expressed her frustration with these culturally mandated rules:

I feel like there’s a lot of stuff that’s just cultural, that’s the stuff that bugs me...So at the synagogue men and women sit separately, so there is a divider, it’s called the *Mechitza*⁶, okay, cool, I have absolutely no problem with that. In our synagogue, it’s basically as egalitarian as you can get with still being Orthodox. The men and women are sitting side by side, so it’s not like anybody is in the front or the back and the service is happening in front in the middle, so that everybody can see it the same way. There are no women in the service, women are not getting called up to read from the torah. I’m totally fine with that, that’s part of Jewish law and I get it, but then sometimes I’ll go to another synagogue where the *Mechitza* is unnecessarily opaque or high or the women can’t see anything or they can’t hear anything and then I’m just annoyed, that has nothing to do with Jewish law that just has to do with not being mindful. So then I get irritated (R.K.).

For R.K., the unnecessary restriction of women manifests itself most clearly in the creation of the excessive *Mechitza*. A.F. also brought up the challenge of distinguishing rules of Jewish Law from rules created by the Orthodox community but in regards to education. She described the challenge of finding a school that matched the observance of her family, and explained that because her kids are boys she is more comfortable sending them to a school that is “a little more religious that I would necessarily like.” Aviva’s kids being boys means that these rules,

⁶ A physical partition placed in synagogues usually used to separate men and women in services and celebrations.

determined solely by community, have a lesser impact on them than they would on girls.

However, A.F.'s experiences indicate that cultural roles also impact boys. A.F. explained that "religious isn't the right word." Struggling to find the right adjective to describe her son's school she expanded on how there are "a lot of stupidities" and how the school has tried to determine things such as which extracurricular activities her boys can and cannot participate in despite the fact that a Karate class is not against Jewish law.

Other women also brought up brought up these cultural customs in regards to rules about modesty and marriage. While not required, marriage is an integral part of being a community member. M.S. explained that "it's okay, but it's sad" to not be married and women who are single or widowed are often "lonely." The covering of a woman's hair is also a decision that is greatly impacted by standards set by the community, not just by Jewish Law. Hair covering can be defined as a religious rule dictated by Jewish Law or a cultural custom. All of the women talked cover their hair but how they choose to do that is impacted by their communities. R.K. is the only woman who regularly wears a scarf. She used to wear a wig and "looked just like everybody else but I knew that I was really wearing a wig" (R.K.). She felt that wearing a wig was a way to observe the *mitzvah* but not be too different from others in her mostly secular community. For her, wearing a scarf is a source of pride in her religiousness; "I'm proud to be Jewish, and I'm proud to be doing this *mitzvah*, so yeah I'm gonna be ethnic [and wear a scarf] in a secular world and everyone will have to deal" (R.K.). A.F., who was the only woman talked to that worked professionally outside of Jewish education explained that it's "much less professional to wear a random scarf." Nothing in Jewish law dictates how a woman should cover their hair, if it is interpreted to say that they must cover their hair to begin with. Nonetheless both

secular and Orthodox communities place a large value on how women choose to wear their hair.

The norms created within the Jewish communities, and in particular the Orthodox Jewish community, is exemplified by its role in the choices of its members.

Kosher and Shomer Shabbat

Jewish law and culture has a different impact on daily life depending on observancy. For Orthodox women, the “external factors” and specific laws in Judaism are significant aspects to both their daily actions and the larger scheme of their lives (R.K.). According to A.F. (Orthodox) in Orthodox Judaism “there are a lot more rules and regulations...it’s always there.” One of these rules, *Kashrut*⁷, is described by R.K. as a “huge” part of observancy. A.F., who had worked in a secular law office, experienced the challenges of being one of the only people keeping kosher in that setting. She told the story of how her office would prepare unkosher lunches for the employees at a closing to keep the staff working, but she could not eat the unkosher food. A.F. spoke about her coworkers not understanding the regulations of *Kashrut* and the discomfort and feeling of being separated she experienced when being kosher.

Dressing modestly and in accordance to Jewish Law impacts many Jewish women’s day to day lives and is a physical expression of observancy. R.K. (Orthodox) explains that she “covers [her] hair..only wears a skirt...[and] long sleeves,” which was repeated by the other observant women interviewed as well. These women similarly express that they are not “trying to look different,” and M.S. (Orthodox) says, “I want to be kosher [in regards to dress] but not look like I’m trying to look like that.” These women’s adherence to the laws of modesty have an impact on the perceptions of those outside the Orthodox community, and personally affects those who follow them.

⁷ *Kashrut* is the Hebrew word for the body of dietary laws for Jews. Being kosher means observing these laws. These laws include the separation of meat and dairy, prohibiting the consumption of certain types of meat and insects, and slaughtering animals in a certain way.

Another defining aspect of being Orthodox, according to the women interviewed, is being *Shomer Shabbat*⁸. *Shabbat* provides an opportunity to stop and take a break from everyday life, and is a time for community focused meals and activities. S.O. (Orthodox) views “observing *Shabbat*” as particularly important and it “has a special place in [her] heart.” Observing *Shabbat* has a profound meaning for many Orthodox women, but A.F. also experiences the challenges of keeping *Shabbat*. When working in a secular setting A.F. realized “that several times there were job interviews that were going great until they were like are you available for training [on Friday evening].” Being *Shomer Shabbat* limited her ability to attend job training sessions and set her apart in her work environment.

Interestingly, none of the women interviewed mentioned synagogue life or the Torah as having an impact on their daily lives. These things not being mentioned reflects the emphasis of keeping kosher, dressing modestly, and being *Shomer Shabbat* in Orthodox women’s lives, and leaves the question of what would be different in Orthodox men’s answers.

While Jewish law has a significant effect on Orthodox women, less observant women experience an impact beyond Jewish law. H.B. (Reform) explains that she moves in a “Jewish world” and her actions work to “sustain Judaism in [her] daily life.” S.G. (Reform) says she is “personally invested in Judaism,” illustrating that she does not express her religion physically, but through her values and customs. While the idea of Judaism being present in day to day life is parallel to the more observant women’s experience, it manifests itself differently based on observance.

⁸ Observing the *mitzvot* of Shabbat (which occurs weekly between sundown Friday night and sundown Saturday night). Among others, these *mitzvot* include not writing, cooking, using electronic devices, and using money.

“Second Class Citizen” or Liberation?

Throughout the interview process, without being prompted, most of the observant women spoken to brought up the concept of observant women as “second class citizens,” even though some accept the idea and some reject it.

A.F. (Orthodox) was the most verbose and explains her description of Orthodox women as “second class citizens” by stating that in Orthodoxy, “women are deemed less important than men.” She describes her experience as a woman in traditional Judaism as being “more on the sidelines or in the background,” and feels as though “women exist as the support structure for the men who play the vital role. I have long felt that being an Orthodox Jewish woman is like being a spectator at a sporting event”. Women are described by A.F. and others as left out of services at synagogue and absent from the study of Torah, even though many of the Orthodox women had described the Torah and synagogue life as the foundation of their praxis and beliefs. According to A.F., in Orthodoxy, learning Torah is a “man’s obligation” which women are supposed to support. Some Orthodox men go to synagogue three times a day and their wives “operate around [their husband’s] schedule,” essentially “making it possible” without being “involved in it” (R.K., A.F.). These women describe a system in which Orthodox women’s lives are structured to support the Orthodox men in their communities and come second to men’s lives.

When A.F. worked in an office with an Orthodox male boss, she felt in that setting, “being a woman was a little more difficult because you’re automatically a second class citizen.” She shared that the Orthodox boss’s treatment of the women in the office was demeaning, referring to the female secretary as “my girl” (A.F.). The idea and experience of the defined gender roles for Orthodox women varies within different communities and “some people

appreciate and like it and some people go against” it (A.F.). Alternatively, A.F. accepts the limitations on womanhood as part of her practice of Judaism because of her appreciation of the other aspects of observancy. Other women feel that Orthodox women have a separate but equal power and role in Judaism but don’t “need to nurture [their power] or show it all the time” (M.S.). M.S. (Orthodox) believes that “those [rules that separate men and women] are smart,” and although the genders are separated, she does “not feel like a second class citizen,” and accepts her role. However, the choice of the word “feel” suggests that she recognizes the presence of the idea of second class citizenship but does not experience it as demeaning.

Not all of the women who brought up the idea of second class citizenship think it is present in Orthodox Judaism. The other women who spoke about this concept described and acknowledged a sense of defined binary gender roles, but worked to prove the idea of second class citizenship as wrong. S.O. (Orthodox) explained that as an Orthodox woman, she feels that her role is the “same across the board” and there is “nothing that me or [my husband] can’t do.” In contrast to A.F.’s experience of being limited by the gender roles, G.D. (Orthodox) and S.O. feel it is actually liberating and gives them more rights and power than in the “misogynistic secular world” (G.D.). Having a stronger role at home and in child rearing than in the synagogue or study of Torah is a positive aspect of Judaism and these women take pride in it.

The concept of Judaism empowering women manifests itself differently for the interviewees depending on observancy and their community. G.D.’s experience growing up in a secular community included many negative experiences where she felt unsafe and disrespected because she is a woman. She discussed the idea that there is “power” in sexuality and men have the ability to abuse it, but Orthodoxy is designed to “protect” women from the “misogyny in

secular society” (G.D.). These women believe the separate gender roles do not diminish women’s power and influence in Jewish life, but that “Judaism [gives] women rights” and there is a “strong orthodox female voice” (S.O., R.K.). Orthodox women having a strong voice is encouraged and women “want to empower [other] Jewish women” because they believe “we make a difference” (S.O.). While these observant women find “Orthodox Judaism to be much more feminist [than the secular world she had grown up in]” and liberating (G.D.), A.F. feels that the arguments claiming women are equal to men in Orthodox Judaism do not justify the lesser role women have in Orthodoxy:

Of course there are now apologists who try to make this all palatable and they offer all sorts of explanations for how women really are just as important, and why women were given fewer commandments, etc., but most of it rings hollow. There are also women who make post facto attempts to carve out space for themselves in Jewish life. These are woman who host large challah baking events, women in very modern Orthodox synagogues who do study Torah and then obtain a quasi official position as Rabbi's helper, women who make youtube videos about the beauty of Orthodox Judaism. Of course, none of this really changes the position of women in Orthodox Judaism.

The belief that the role women play in Orthodox Judaism is designed to be less important and honorable than a man’s is directly opposed by the ideal that “Orthodox women run the world” and have rights that protect and free them (G.D.). Despite the conflict around Orthodox women’s role, many women are empowered and proud of their role.

Gender Roles

Gendered roles are an integral part of Orthodoxy and are at the center of the debate about women's equality. Gender roles manifest themselves in varying ways, but there were two prominent themes brought up by the observant women interviewed. Almost all of them brought up the importance of the different locations where Judaism is practiced and the significance of *Niddah*⁹. Both of these concepts have a significant connection to the roles of observant women. While generally more observant women have different roles from men in synagogue, they are in charge of religious life at home. G.D. (Orthodox) explained that "women are actually the spiritual ones and lead the home in spirituality." The understanding that women do not take place in religious practices at synagogue was prevalent throughout different interviews. S.O. (Orthodox) elaborated on this stating that "prayer manifests itself differently in our synagogue between men and women." A.F. doesn't go to synagogue at all. Her take on a women's relationship to synagogue was that it is incredibly minimal and that that most "minor holidays are men's holidays" (A.F.). While most women explained that a role in the synagogue is minimal if existent at all, S.O. talked about how while there are roles unavailable to women in synagogue there are also roles not designated for men; "I don't necessarily take part in certain rituals...there are other parts that are mine that he doesn't take part in" (S.O.). Less observant women expressed their frustration with the aspects of observant Judaism that they view as limiting. For E.C. (Reform), Reform Judaism means that "I can have a bat mitzvah and read from the Torah" which is not something a woman would be able to do in an orthodox synagogue.

⁹ The Hebrew term for the Jewish laws of ritual purity. Many women interviewed also referred to these laws as Family Purity Laws. These laws govern when a husband and wife can be intimate based on the menstruation cycle of the wife. They also describe the use of the *mikvah* (a bath used to ritually purify one who chooses to use it, and is used during the conversion process).

The laws of Family Purity also create specific gender related laws for women. For observant women, these laws are viewed as liberating and meaningful but they continue to be a massive divider between observant and less observant communities. Family Purity laws are a contentious issue because many less observant women see them as labeling women as dirty when they are menstruating. Some Orthodox Women debunked this idea, explaining that “we don’t consider it clean or unclean, we consider [menstruating] close to death” (M.S.). The conflict around this issue also stems from the implication that the purpose of a woman’s life is to bear children because of the belief that menstruating, and therefore not being pregnant, means they are “close to death.” Even so, Family Purity Laws are a valued part of the lives of many women spoken to. G.D., who professionally works in education regarding sexuality in Orthodox Judaism, emphasized the importance of “intimacy.” Having attended secular American university she felt the immense pressures of college hook-up culture and sees Family Purity Laws as protection against sexual violence and harassment. S.O. echoed this belief when she explained how the Family Purity Laws in Orthodoxy have allowed her to “never feel objectified” because of her gender. For S.O., Family Purity Laws create an opportunity for abstention and greater respect, and “enhance a sexual and intimate relationship” bringing greater meaning to sex and intimacy. The complexities of Family Purity Laws are in many ways reflective of the ideas about gender roles that many women brought up.

The existence of specified gender roles, even in their broadest sense, has a large impact across observance of Judaism. As S.O. explained, roles “manifest themselves differently” for men and women. While acknowledgment of the existence of clear gender roles was unanimous amongst the Orthodox women interviewed, there was clear disagreement over whether or not

such roles have to be perfectly equal. M.S. (Orthodox) felt strongly that “nothing in life is ever 50-50” but that does not mean that either women or men are lesser. In contrast, G.D. stressed the importance of her and her husband being equal partners. Along with the idea of whether the gendered roles in Orthodoxy are perfectly divided was the concept that “particular roles” can coexist with “independence for women” (S.O.). R.K. (Orthodox) alluded to the same idea when she stated, “I do appreciate a sense of binary gender roles that are clear and understood” that she believes in a big way “serve society.” As G.D. explained, the role of a woman typically “isn’t as public,” including the jobs of wife and mother which she sees as an integral part of her identity. G.D. loves and is immensely proud of the roles of wife and mother. She spoke frequently about the joy those titles bring her and how it saddens her that they are seen as lesser. She continually expressed how while women’s roles are clearly different from men they can be just as, if not more, rewarding and fulfilling.

However, there are many jobs that don’t perfectly fit the defined gender roles of Orthodoxy. For women such as A.F. (Orthodox), who has held positions beyond the home or education, the idea that a women’s role is more private creates a glass ceiling. She explained that working for an Orthodox boss allowed her to more easily maintain the necessary days off and customs associated with her religion, but “being a woman was a little more difficult.” Working in a predominantly Orthodox law firm and a secular law firm gave A.F. more exposure to the secular world. This allowed A.F. a perspective different from the other observant woman spoken to. She has always been Orthodox but has been involved in secular society in ways that many Orthodox women spoken to have not. This seems to have allowed A.F. to develop a robust opinion on the implications of gendered roles on the lives of women and girls:

“It starts from birth. When a boy is born, there is a *shalom zachor* (a small party for men who come congratulate the the baby boy's father the first Friday night after the child is born), a *vachnacht* (a party the night before the bris, when the father stays up all night learning Torah and watches over the baby), and finally the bris - when the child joins the covenant between [G-d] and the Jewish people. When a girl is born, there is nothing. Often the parents will sponsor a *kiddush*¹⁰ following services on a Shabbos morning sometime after her birth on a date that is convenient for them. Many people don't even do that. However, people will sponsor a *kiddush* for any happy event in their lives, it's not specific to the birth of a daughter. And there is definitely no ceremonial celebration of a girl as a new Jew. At 13, boys reach the age of [maturity]. They learn to read from the Torah and have a Bar Mitzvah celebrating the fact that they are now full participants in Jewish life. Girls reach the age of [maturity] at 12, but with a lot less fanfare. Girls may have a Bat Mitzvah party, but they do not read from the Torah and it's a much smaller affair than a boy would have, if they even have a party at all. After all, women aren't active participants in Jewish life, so maybe there is less to celebrate?”

A.F. expressed the idea that the gender roles of Orthodoxy force women into less important positions. While A.F. is not against strong binary rules, she expressed clear frustration with feeling like these rules tend to keep women out of what she sees as the most important parts of Orthodox Judaism. As A.F. explained above, while women may lead life culturally, they are often excluded from religious practices. For her, this creates a notion that women are lesser which impacts other aspects of Orthodoxy. In contrast, for many of the other women we spoke to, being the “foundation” (R.K.) of Jewish life and culture ensures significant roles in Orthodoxy. While A.F. sees the role created for women by Orthodox Jewish laws and customs as one meant to be “in the background,” there were other women who see it as foundational (A.F.). Rather than viewing themselves as “spectators” (A.F) women such as G.D. and S.O. see themselves as “running the world” in a different but equally impactful way. While women such as A.F. and G.D. clearly disagree, they are also grappling with many of the same questions. They

¹⁰ A small meal held on *Shabbat* and festival mornings after the service and before the main meal.

are both trying to figure out if separate and defined gender roles can be equal, but have come to drastically different conclusions.

Conclusion

During our interviews, it was easy to forget how deeply religious the observant women we interviewed are. Their faith drives all aspects of their lives and is an essential part of their beliefs, morals, and personas. We realized that for religious Jewish women, their strong beliefs have to manifest themselves in daily life because they do not express their religion through synagogue and Torah study, as Orthodox men and less religious Jews do. The gender roles of their society dictate that the hub of their Judaism is placed in the home, their motherhood, and supporting their husbands.

The various opinions and beliefs about the role of women in Orthodox Judaism reflects the diversity of experiences held by Orthodox women. Misconceptions held not only by less observant Jews and non-Jews, but also by other Orthodox women, limits discussion and a greater understanding of the profound and interesting opinions these women hold.

One common idea we found that tied much of our research together, is the notion that women's roles in Orthodox Judaism are "separate but equal". Some woman used this phrase to support their explanation of their defined role, and in contrast, others claimed that while it is accurate that women's roles are separate they therefore cannot be equal. There is no one dominant belief regarding whether Orthodoxy's separate roles are equal. The question of "separate but equal" is not unique to Orthodoxy but the fact that being Orthodox is a choice complicates the meaning of the phrase. "Separate but equal" is a way of protecting and empowering women. However the "irony" is in the ability to use gender roles as an excuse for misogyny.

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