

Religion, Culture and Gender Guides



The purpose of the Guides is to showcase the work of Manchester students on the theme of Religion, Culture and Gender in Britain, and provide creative, informative and critically informed resources on this theme.

The Guide: The Role of Jewish Orthodox Women in Religious Practice

Kayley Davies

The following piece of writing focuses on the role of **Jewish Orthodox** women in religious practice and intends to inform those interested in Jewish practice and gender studies – whether Jewish or **gentile** – with reference to theories from different perspectives on the topic. It also focuses on the case study from the Israeli news website *The Times of Israel* concerning the launch of the Jewish Orthodox **Feminist** Alliance (JOFA) in the UK. As the article is from Israel, there is the possible issue that the writer may not have a full understanding on the Jewish issues in the UK, which readers should be aware of.

Case Study: The Times of Israel

The article from *The Times of Israel* by Miriam Shaviv, reports on the JOFA UK launch in March 2013 that was mainly encouraged by ‘a major report on women’s roles in the community,¹’ where there was a keen ‘interest in “**partnership minyanim**,” where women lead some of the **davening**²’. Those present at the launch discussed issues they wished to be addressed which included the lack of female ‘participation in Orthodox ritual life [...], women in **lay** leadership positions, gender issues in Jewish schools and how to give girls meaningful **bat mitzvah** experiences.³’ One woman commented on how the gender inequality in Jewish schools is “‘devastating: these girls become women who are ignorant of [Jewish law]. They have to learn later in life instead of being knowledgeable from the start.’”⁴ Reflecting on her own personal experiences, a 31-year-old doctor who was present at the launch, Tammy Bedier talked of how she was usually left feeling “‘totally isolated”’ religiously, and has even

¹ Miriam Shaviv, “Orthodox Women’s Group Sets Sights on Jewish Life in UK,” *The Times of Israel*, March 16, 2013, accessed January 11, 2014, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/orthodox-womens-group-sets-sights-on-jewish-life-in-uk/>.

² Shaviv, *Times of Israel*

³ Shaviv, *Times of Israel*

⁴ Shaviv, *Times of Israel*

considered moving somewhere “more dynamic and forward-thinking”⁵.’ The article concludes with Bedier stating that the ‘discussion was “very inspiring, but also quite scary, [...] there is so much to be done.”⁶

Theories and Perspectives Contending JOFA

In response to the launch, **Rabbi** Yitzchak Schochet wrote an article for *The Jewish Chronicle* arguing that while women should have equality in the world, there are reasons why it is necessary to approach this differently in a religious perspective, although ‘it is understandable, in a world where women are finding more expression, that they seek the same within the religious sphere⁷.’ For example, ‘That men and women sit separately in synagogue is in order to preserve modesty in a place of prayer⁸.’ Rabbi Schochet believes such laws and rituals to be ‘well documented as having to do with the spiritual dynamic of men, which is innate to women⁹.’ Rabbi Schochet’s view is opposed by Rabbi Julia Neuberger, who believes that the **mehitzah** was gradually introduced in the mediaeval period and that was ‘probably merely a division in seating originally but which led to women sitting up in a gallery, or behind a curtain¹⁰.’ Rabbi Schochet also believes that the reasons for women’s desire for spiritual involvement should be considered:

Those who look to satisfy a soul craving, will adhere to what rabbis tell them is permissible in Jewish law and act on it graciously. But those who push the boundaries

⁵ Shaviv, *Times of Israel*

⁶ Shaviv, *Times of Israel*

⁷ Rabbi Yitzchak Schochet, “Orthodox Feminism Must Know its Limits” *The Jewish Chronicle*, June 23, 2013, accessed January 11, 2014, <http://www.thejc.com/judaism/judaism-features/108876/orthodox-feminism-must-know-its-limits>.

⁸ Rabbi Schochet, *The Jewish Chronicle*

⁹ Rabbi Schochet, *The Jewish Chronicle*

¹⁰ Rabbi Julia Neuberger, “Women in Judaism: the Fact and the Fiction,” in *Women’s Religious Experience*, ed. Pat Holden (Kent: Croom Helm, 1983), p. 138.

and look for some rabbi somewhere that would give them the nod to perhaps even step over the boundaries, are, without doubt, coming with ulterior motif.¹¹

Rabbi Schochet reiterates his argument that the lack of female leadership positions in the Jewish religious sphere comes from laws and texts that cannot be questioned because of their religious authority. For a woman to go against this means that ‘not only does she not appreciate her unique role within the Jewish faith, but she misses the point as to what Jewish practice is altogether.’¹² With these points in mind, he states that ‘JOFA must be sure to stay true to normative **halakhah** if it wants to galvanise support.’¹³ Rabbi Schochet’s use of divine authority to support his argument that there should be limits on female involvement in Jewish religious leadership is a common one, and so it is interesting to observe it in a modern context with reference to JOFA.

Although he does not necessarily support the view, Michael L. Satlow recognises that one of the influences defining the Jewish construction of masculinity and the male role comes from **prerabbinic** Jewish wisdom and non-Jewish philosophy. Satlow states that there are two main themes from this:

First, **self-mastery** is a prerequisite for a life of the mind [...] gendered as characteristically male. Second, the pursuit of the life of the mind is also gendered as a masculine activity [...] as early as **Aristotle**; the lack of self-mastery was a sign of weakness, a characteristic that was soon gendered as feminine¹⁴.

What is striking is that what has influenced a common concept of gender division in Judaism is likely to have influenced other societies and religions; a link which those focused on gender studies may be interested in.

¹¹ Rabbi Schochet, *The Jewish Chronicle*

¹² Rabbi Schochet, *The Jewish Chronicle*

¹³ Rabbi Schochet, *The Jewish Chronicle*

¹⁴ Michael L. Satlow, ““Try To Be A Man”: The Rabbinic Construction Of Masculinity,” *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 89 (1996): p. 21.

Theories and Perspectives Complying with JOFA

In her book, *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism*, Tova Hartman documents her feelings of isolation as a female in the **synagogue**. Hartman describes her experiences regarding her questioning different rabbis as to why females were left out in much of Jewish Orthodox worship. One answer that Hartman regularly received demonstrates a similar argument to that of Rabbi Schochet; that a woman who questions the Jewish religious authority is simply uneducated:

The common response was that having a **Torah Scroll** in the room makes it different; and furthermore, if you really understood what a Torah Scroll means, you would not feel that way, you wouldn't ask the question.¹⁵

Following her questions continually being inadequately answered or not answered at all, Hartman then began to question the authoritative structure of Orthodox Judaism. 'When is it okay to notice that something is not right? Who gets to define what a problem is?'¹⁶ The relation to the case study here is that similar questions to these encouraged the JOFA launch in the UK and were also put forward during event of the launch itself.

Hartman uses the three models for reconciling subjective experience and religious tradition – **reaffirmation**, **reinterpretation** and **rejection**. Here, she analyses these models in reference to **Beruriah**, 'an example of a learned and modest woman'¹⁷, from different Talmudic sources:

Beruriah in the **Talmud** is the exception to any of the rules concerning women's intelligence and abilities to study. She is portrayed as having superior intellectual and moral attributes, superior to many of the scholars or rabbis¹⁸.

¹⁵ Tova Hartman, *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism: Resistance and Accommodation* (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 2007), p. 20.

¹⁶ Hartman, *Feminism Encounter*, p. 20.

¹⁷ Hartman, *Feminism Encounter*, p. 35.

¹⁸ Hartman, *Feminism Encounter*, p. 36.

Through the reaffirmation model, Hartman concludes that the story of Beruriah would be used as an example of a woman who other women should not aim to be:

The tradition claimed that women were not to study the Talmud [...], not to be a part of Judaism's intellectual and cultural endeavour [...] designed for men only. [...] This image should never be challenged¹⁹.

The reinterpetive model would likely contextualise Beruriah's story. This model 'accepts the previous reading but empties it of its direct authority and legitimacy in defining the nature of womanhood [...] it rereads the text²⁰.' Finally, the rejection model would portray the story as an example of the warped imagery of women:

These texts reveal that this tradition was written by men for men. There is a narrative of history that had excluded women. Man is the subject, women is the "Other" [...]. This model stresses that the tradition leaves no choice but rejection²¹.

Hartman's use of the three models could be valuable to JOFA's work as it educates women in regards to how they have the power to assess their religion on their own terms and think about it on a personal level, rather than believing that they have no choice but to accept the authoritative figures of their religion and what they state as the unquestionable truth.

Judith Plaskow focuses on the terms **orthodoxy** and **orthopraxis**, stating that 'Judaism has always been a religion of orthopraxis²²' and that the term:

has had at least two distinctly different meanings in Jewish theology and practice: social justice and obedience to halakhah. The first meaning, spirituality as social justice

¹⁹ Hartman, *Feminism Encounter*, p. 37.

²⁰ Hartman, *Feminism Encounter*, p. 38.

²¹ Hartman, *Feminism Encounter*, pp. 39-41.

²² Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991) p. 214.

[...], the **prophets** affirm that the forms of worship are meaningless in the absence of social justice²³.

Here, Plaskow implies that there is no social justice in gender inequality and, that Jewish worship that does not include women as it includes men is therefore meaningless. Plaskow's theory encourages equality and the involvement of women in religious. The perception that 'feminist ideas and experiences will be able to develop fully only with the creation of feminist institutions²⁴' also directly supports the launch of JOFA.

Michael L. Satlow links gender traits to Jewish textual sources, arguing that they measure manhood through 'that uniquely male trait, self-restraint, in the pursuit of the **divine** through **Torah study**.²⁵' What is striking here is that while this argument might be interpreted as an exclusion of women from Torah study, Satlow overthrows this by stating that:

To be a man means to exercise self-control in the pursuit of the divine through the study of Torah or a life of the mind. Women too could have a relationship with God if only they adopted those traits that were defined as distinctively male²⁶.

Such a theory could appeal to the views of JOFA as it could make Torah study more available to women. On the other hand, it may not be agreeable with the work of JOFA as it gives a sexist view on traits by defining them as either male or female. It also proposes that for a woman to take part in Torah study, she should attempt to change her identity to match a male definition, suggesting that women have to change to be worthy of a life of the mind.

²³ Plaskow, *Sinai*, p. 214.

²⁴ Plaskow, *Sinai*, p. 211.

²⁵ Satlow, *Theological Review*, p. 20.

²⁶ Satlow, *Theological Review*, p.40.

Glossary

Aristotle: A Greek philosopher born in 384 BCE.

Bat mitzvah: A religious ceremony celebrating a Jewish girl's point of reaching religious maturity; twelve years and one day.

Beruriah: A woman featured in the Talmud and respected for her great knowledge in halakhah. She was the daughter of Rabbi Hananiah Ben Teradion and the wife of the Tanna Rabbi Meir.

Davening: The reciting of liturgical prayers that is part of the partnership minyanim.

Divine: A term given to a God or gods.

Feminist: A person who desires and works towards gender equality in all aspects of life such as economic, religious, spiritual, educational and communal.

Gentile: A term used to state that a person is not Jewish.

Halakhah: A group of Jewish religious laws such as Talmudic, rabbinic and biblical law.

Jewish Orthodox: A common branch of Judaism where followers adhere to a strict set of rules based on the Torah and other religious literature.

Lay: The term given to religious people who serve God, but have no religious authority in their religion.

Mehitzah: A division usually used to separate men and women in the synagogue.

Orthodoxy: A belief, which is considered to be the only correct belief.

Orthopraxis: An action, which is considered to be the only correct action.

Partnership minyanim: The name JOFA gave to a prayer group where both men and women are able to lead parts of the worship, while still following the laws of Orthodox Judaism or halakhah.

Prerabbinic: Relating to the time before the teachings of the rabbis had developed.

Prophet: A person who has experienced the divine and preaches the will of God.

Rabbi: Someone who studies and teaches Jewish religious laws and texts.

Reaffirmation: The act of restating ones beliefs in order to confirm the validity of them.

Reinterpretation: The act of giving a different or new meaning to one's beliefs, interpreting it to fit with one's way of life.

Rejection: The act of dismissing one's previous beliefs because they do not fit with a personal way of life.

Self-mastery: The ability to control oneself without succumbing to urges of the mind and body.

Synagogue: The building where Jewish people congregate in order to worship or carry out religious rituals.

Talmud: A key Jewish text with two components: the Mishnah and the Gemara and contains the theories of many rabbis on topics such as Jewish ethics and law.

Torah Scroll: A hand written copy of the Torah and one of the holiest books in Judaism. The scroll is used in reading rituals in Jewish worship and is kept in the holiest part of the synagogue; the 'Ark'.

Torah study: The learning and analysis of all Jewish religious texts including the Talmud, Torah and Hebrew Bible, and is considered to be an important part of Jewish religion.

Annotated Bibliography

Hartman, Tova. *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism: Resistance and Accommodation*. Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 2007.

Hartman's work confronts the issue of subjective experience colliding with social norms based on religious truths. Hartman talks personally about the limitations on her worship as an educated Jewish female. This, along with the example of Beruriah, bettered my understanding of how feminists with clashing personal experiences and religious traditions

might approach such a problem. Although helpful in its own right, the reading gave a contrasting point of view to that of Rabbi Schochet which helped me in presenting a guide with balanced views.

Neuberger, Rabbi Julia. "Women in Judaism: the Fact and the Fiction." In *Women's Religious Experience*, edited by Pat Holden. Kent: Croom Helm, 1983.

Rabbi Neuberger attempts to differentiate between fact and fiction regarding the role and treatment of women in Judaism. She concludes that the women of Orthodox Judaism must assert their equality to men, rather than accepting their lower status. Rabbi Neuberger's work helped me present an example of questioning textual authority; an interesting counter-argument to Rabbi Schochet.

Plaskow, Judith. *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991.

The excerpt I read from Plaskow's book investigates how patriarchal thought supports patriarchy as a social system but that feminist ideas could help to alter these structures. Plaskow's argument is well composed because its structure is similar to that of many disagreeing with her as she affirms her beliefs with reference to religious textual authority. By observing that opposing parties can use the same evidence to come to different conclusions, I was able to demonstrate that theories are based on interpretation, which aided me in presenting these beliefs impartially.

Satlow, Michael L. ““Try To Be A Man”: The Rabbinic Construction Of Masculinity,”
The Harvard Theological Review. Vol. 89 (1996). pp. 19-40.

Satlow questions what it means to be and what makes a man in Judaism, concluding that the title of ‘manhood’ is achieved when traits that are gendered as male are used. He adds that logically, women can use these traits and should then be classed as achieving manhood, although the rabbinic tradition states that a woman is born a woman and cannot attain ‘manhood’. Satlow’s argument presented many examples of arguments opposing his own, suggesting that his theory was stronger than that of others.

Schochet, Rabbi Yitzchak. “Orthodox Feminism Must Know its Limits.” *The Jewish Chronicle*, June 23, 2013. Accessed January 11, 2014.
<http://www.thejc.com/judaism/judaism-features/108876/orthodox-feminism-must-know-its-limits>.

The Jewish Chronicle is a weekly newspaper based in London that was founded in 1841. Rabbi Yitzchak Schochet’s article in this newspaper was particularly helpful because it was a direct response to the UK launch of JOFA and was therefore highly relevant. Rabbi Schochet’s appreciation of gender equality in society shows a possible acceptance of women’s leadership roles in UK Jewish society, yet his thoughts on women leading worship juxtaposes this. It is interesting to see a Jewish leader hold a modern approach towards gender equality outside of religion. However, he stays true to what he considers to be the absolute religious authority and does not accept that women should be active in Jewish worship.

Shaviv, Miriam. "Orthodox Women's Group Sets Sights on Jewish Life in UK." *The Times of Israel*, March 16, 2013. Accessed January 11, 2014. <http://www.timesofisrael.com/orthodox-womens-group-sets-sights-on-jewish-life-in-uk/>.

The Times of Israel is an online newspaper which launched in 2012. Although the article is not from a UK source, I decided to use it as my case study because it gave a highly descriptive and well written report on the launch of JOFA in the UK. It was presented in quite a balanced way and did not present an argument or opinion regarding the launch from the writer and was mainly based on factual information. There were interviews included from JOFA's UK ambassador, Dina Brawer and other women present at the launch. However, the article did not include interviews from either the men present at the launch, or people who did not see the UK JOFA launch in a positive way, presenting a gender imbalance in itself and causing the report to be less balanced than it could have been.