

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 *Ba'alot T'shuva* Phenomenon in Orthodox Judaism

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In an article from the Jewish website of *Chabad.org*, Davida Goldberg reviews how she gradually found her way back to Orthodoxy Judaism¹. Born in a Christianity family, she never felt content with her family's belief. On her journey looking for other spiritual sustenance, she once turned to an ashram but finally, she converted herself to Orthodox Judaism, where she 'would ultimately find Truth'.

This case study could be related to a general phenomenon that previously uncommitted women return to Orthodox Judaism in their adult lives, in Hebrew known as the *Ba'alot T'shuva*. This issue has aroused a great many academic attention because of the general recognition of women's second-class status in Orthodox Judaism, while many of these returning women are 'affluent and well-educated' (Kaufman, 1987:60). Contrary to the general assumption of being oppressed, several groups of Orthodox women have conveyed a sense of fulfilment and self-esteem (Baker, 1993:103). As such, this guide shall offer an exploration towards the nature of the tradition to which the *Ba'alot T'shuva* are returning to, where lies the dynamics between internalization of patriarchy and the celebration of femininity.

Oppression from Patriarchy

As a common argument, various forms of fundamentalism tend to be perceived as exerting control and oppression on women (Brown, 1994:176; 188-189). When it comes to Orthodox Judaism, the different treatments towards men and women can be easily observed in various aspects of their lives, no matter in the macro or micro levels. This section would briefly introduce the women's inferior position in Orthodox Judaism from the following aspects, namely the rituals and institution, the practice of *Niddah* and regulations on marriage.

The root of the inequality lies in *halacha*, the Jewish religious Law, which attributes a lower legal status to women than men. As Kaufman has stated, this is 'a legal system created, defined, and refined exclusively by males' (1987:60). Under such system, the Jewish women are disadvantaged in several aspects. In terms of rituals and institutional duties, women are excluded from public prayer or any role in public religious life; they do not have the right to study Torah either (Kaufman, 1987:60; Baker, 1993:48). The underlying explanation for such exclusion is that, 'Women are second best in public prayer... public ritual life is the province of men' (Biale, 1984:28; see in Baker, 1993:49). This unfairness is also reflected by some of the responses from the women in Lynn Davidman's study. Although these women committed themselves to Orthodox Judaism voluntarily, they still found women's inferior position in synagogue problematic (1993:95-6).

¹ See in

http://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/1089533/jewish/From-a-Baptist-Church-to-an-Orthodox-Synagogue.htm

Another salient evidence of Orthodox Judaism's oppression on women could be seen in the practice of *Niddah*, which consists of immersion and nonsexual contact. For many feminists, this act degrades women and their body because of it can be read as the result of menstrual taboo. As Judith Plaskow (1990) has stated, 'women are a source of moral danger and an incitement to depravity and lust' (see Hartman, 2007:82). Yet in a sense, these are the theoretical critique from theorists outside the tradition, and we shall come back to this issue later from another perspective. As for the laws about divorce, Jewish women are also in a disadvantageous position, where a husband could easily divorce his wife yet a wife could ask for divorce under limited circumstances, which requires further approval by the religious leaders in the community (Baker, 1993:55).

The oppression on women in Orthodox Judaism does not confine to the aspects above, but from them we can already form a basic understanding on the repressive side of Orthodox Judaism. As it has been noticed by a great number of feminists, women are not part of the cannon in many religions, which means their voices are missing and their problems are ignored (Hartman, 2007:118). The power of patriarchy in the Orthodox Jewish community can be viewed as an example of Sandra Lipsitz Bem's 'lenses of gender', which consist of gender polarization, androcentrism and biological essentialism (see King, 1995:8). Here the distinction between male and female is stabilized by the religious law, and the inferior position of female is reinforced by law and rhetoric of male religious leaders in various aspects of live.

With such oppressive facts in mind, what is more provoking is some women's affirmation towards such tradition and the continuous appearance of new *Ba'alot T'shuva*. As Hartman (2007:92) states, some feminists tend to interpret this phenomenon as a total internalization of patriarchal regulations that they cease to resist and submit themselves to the regulations voluntarily (see also Baker, 1993:47). Just like the allegory of Panopticon raised by Foucault (1977), the women inside the tradition are transformed to be the supporters of the very repression on themselves.

A celebration of femininity

Powerful as the above critique maybe, Tova Hartman has pointed out that such argument is usually made without listening to the voice of women who are actually living inside the tradition, which leads to the deficiency in its theoretical framework (Hartman, 2007: 83). Because of this, we should turn to examine the same issue from the perspective of women who live within the Orthodoxy community.

Here we shall once again use the practice of *Niddah* as an example. According to Harman, the women she interviewed had various responses to this ritual and a number of them found great value and benefit from their observance (2007: 89-96). One thing appreciated by the women is that, *Niddah* provides them with a legitimate non-sexual

period in married life, which is regarded as essential to their physical and emotional peace (Hartman, 2007:91). Similar responses could be noticed from Kaufman's study, where women spoke about the sense of "autonomy" and "control" when they practice the rituals of sexual separation; and this comes together with an increase in awareness and care to their own bodies (1987:61). The importance of such ritual is that, it is in accordance with the women's experience about their own body and mind. In Hartman's words, 'it is not merely prescriptive... but descriptive of their own deepest understanding and experience of themselves' (2007: 93). What is more, the tradition provides these women with a legitimate voice to refuse their husbands' sexual desire, which is rather rare in the patriarchal society no matter secular or religious.

Although as it has been mentioned above, that the Jewish law is entirely created by men, the women from Hartman's study displayed their agency by making use of the ritual for their own sake. Hartman noticed that some women used *mikvah* as a sexual weapon. By postponing their immersion, these women show their protest to the injustice happened in their community, or as a way of birth control (2007:95). It is generally assumed that in a patriarchal society, women as the inferior are the one being oppressed, yet the Orthodox women show the power from the weaker group is also valid in such society. Here the Orthodox women offer a powerful ground for R. W. Connell's critique of socialization model of gender identity, the idea that sex roles were acquired by the socialization imposed by agencies like 'the family, the school, the peer group and the mass media' (2002:77). On the contrary he argues that, people under such agencies are not merely passive learners and simply internalising what they are offered. As in the case of Orthodox women and *mikvah*, the ritual per se is oppressive towards female in some sense, but what is more important is that, these women are observing the rules in their own way as an active agent. Connell draws people's attention to the existence of 'pleasure, resistance and struggle' in the complex process of socialization, and the Orthodox women just displays how they can articulate the rituals formed by men to the fight for their interests.

Through observing the tradition, the *Ba'alot T'shuva* in Kaufman's study felt they were connected to their history and could go even beyond their present community which is dominated by male (1987:61-2). Baker also notices this kind of connection inside community and shared experience among the women (1993:117). Considering their rejection towards individualism before returning to Orthodoxy, we can understand how important this sense of community means to them. Similar insight could also be drawn from Hartman's cases, where women in a community show their protest towards unfairness by postponing their *mikveh* as a group. Hartman comments that the real significance of this case lies in the 'communal influence with which Orthodox women fell empowered by the laws of *Niddah* (2007:95).

Another aspect valued by the *Ba'alot T'shuva* is the Orthodoxy way of family life. According to Kaufman (1987:62), the Orthodox Judaism is 'a tradition with a moral ordering in which women play a fundamental role'. In order to maintain the normal

operation of such tradition, the Jewish community has to rely heavily on the roles of mothers and wives. In this sense, by undertaking feminine roles and fulfilling their domestic duties, these women find themselves playing an essential part in their community same as the men; they are not 'merely as passive reflections of male imagery but, rather, as moral agents for positive action' (Kaufman, 1987: 62). This could be viewed as a counterbalance to the gendered division of labour in the dominant secular world, where women's unpaid work in domestic area is less valued compared to men's achievement in the public sphere. Although the Orthodoxy women are also excluded from joining public affairs, their contribution in private sphere is well acknowledged. Baker comments that these women are 'fulfilling the ideals of the "second wave" of feminism', for they are celebrating the difference of women from men (1993:117). As Davidman noticed from her interview, some of the Orthodox women criticised on the liberal feminists' 'devaluing traditional women's work and trying to be like men' (1991:131). Here, these women do not need to follow the men's path and abandon their femininity in order to achieve their values and respect; their traditional virtues as mothers and wives are revalued and reemphasized.

So far, we have witnessed how women in the Orthodox society actively react towards the norms exclusively established by men. Different from the presumption held by some feminists in the first section, they are not in every sense oppressed by this dominant patriarchy structure. The reason why new *Ba'alot T'shuva* continuously exist is that, embracing the tradition does not necessarily means they have to totally give way to male power and lose their subjectivity. On the contrary, by making use of the ritual for their own sake and allocating new meaning and emphasis on their roles as wives and mothers, the Orthodox women embrace their tradition without losing their initiative. Actually, this could be further clearer if we applied Susan Starr Sered's model of '*Woman as symbol*' and '*women as agents*'. Sered argues that, *Woman* as a symbol is constructed by the 'most tenacious theological and mythological structures in religious traditions', which 'imprint the lives of women involved in those traditions' (1999: 194). The ideal image of *Woman* under the Jewish law is constructed in this way, yet it does not represent the real life of women who are living as a human being inside the community. Conversely, these *women* are 'actual people' who process agency. As Sered clearly stated out, *women* as agents 'can demand rights, enter into negotiations, and protest unfair treatment', which are exactly what Orthodox women are doing in their daily life, although there are difference in the degrees of agency (1999:194).

By realising the agency lies in the Orthodox women, we could go back to ponder the critique risen by Hartman in the beginning of the section. She does not deny the existence of oppression in Orthodox Judaism; however, she insists that, such conclusion should not be readily made without actually talking to these women (2007:81-3). Feminists tend to explain the life of traditional women with pre-existing theoretical framework, thus many of these women are regarded as pathetic for their ignorance towards their disadvantaged place. Hartman warns us that, 'this absenting of

actual women's voices constitutes a conspicuous gap in knowledge, and, consequently, a theoretical weakness' (2007:83).

Although much has been discussed about the celebration of femininity in the tradition of Orthodox Judaism, we must not neglect the fact that this is not equally shared by all the women inside. As Kaufman has mentioned, this 'privilege' is eligible only in the heterosexual nuclear family context: 'unmarried, divorced, widowed, separated, and childless women face clear problems within such communities' (1987:63). Baker has written about the disadvantaged position in which an Orthodox woman may fall if she becomes a widow without a child or lost her husband before she gets divorced (1993:58-61). No need to mention the marginalised status of lesbian in both mainstream society and the Orthodox community. Kaufman concludes her essay by viewing this as 'a short-term tactic which allows them some amount of woman-centered identity' (1987:63). At the same time, she does realise their deficiency in rejection of the patriarchy as a whole since the tradition of male dominance remains untouched.

Summary

By now, we have witnessed how patriarchy oppression and celebration of femininity coexist contradictorily in the life of *Ba'alot T'shuva* at the same time. Instead of simply criticizing them as the ignorant victims of patriarchy, we are able to move a little bit forward to think from their position inside the tradition. Just as Kaufman (1987:63) puts forward in her essay, it is essential for feminists to shed light on the life experience of different women, 'be they a moral majority or a moral minority'. Their voices should always exist in the 'ongoing or historic feminist debates about sex/gender and the family' if we would like to achieve legitimacy in criticisms and to gain righteousness in policy making.

Glossary

Ba'alot T'shuva:

Plural female forms of the Hebrew word referring to someone who becomes newly Orthodox as an adult

Halacha:

A particular law or the whole Jewish legal system. The *Halacha* is composed of the written law, the statements handed down by tradition, the oral law, the sayings of the scribes, and established religious custom.

Mikveh:

Jewish ritual bath. A mikveh is used for ritual cleansing after menstruation.

Niddah:

A Hebrew word means 'menstruating woman'. The Jewish laws relating to menstruating women. Seventh tractate of the order Tohorot of the Mishnah. The laws are numerous and complicated, but are considered essential to a pure family life.

Orthodox Judaism:

Torah-observant Judaism.

Torah:

In Judaism, the law of God as revealed to Moses and recorded in the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Pentateuch).

Bibliography

Baker, Adrienne (1993). *The Jewish Woman in Contemporary Society: Transitions and Traditions*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire : Macmillan.

Baker's book offers a close examination to the life of Jewish women in today's society, both in America and the UK, with a clear standpoint of gender. In this guide, I mainly use Chapter 3 Religious Law and Chapter 5 Aspects of Orthodoxy. Chapter 3 closely looks at how Jewish laws affect the life of the women in various aspects, mainly in a negative way. In Chapter 5 Baker specifically looks at the role of women in Orthodox Jewish community. What makes this book important to the guide is that, Baker highlights the phenomenon of *Ba'alot T'shuva* and gives a brief exploration.

Davidman, Lynn and Greil, Arthur L. (1993). Gender and the Experience of Conversion: The Case of "Returnees" to Modern Orthodox Judaism. *Sociology of Religion*, 54(1), pp.83-100.

Based on a case study about men and women who newly commit themselves to Orthodoxy in Manhattan, this essay seeks to reveal differences in the conversion process between genders. This research offers some basic comparisons between the men and women in the sample and tries to explain the difference by the distinction in gender roles required by both the society and the religious tradition. This essay lacks a detailed study on individuals especially on female and their opinions on returning to tradition, so I only use this essay as a starting point.

Hartman, Tova. (2007). *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism: Resistance and Accommodation*. London: University Press of New England.

Hartman's own standpoint as both an Orthodox Jewish and a feminist makes her argument very unique. Of all the literature on Orthodox women, her book gives the highest approval to their living experience inside the tradition. Hartman also draws our attention to the limitation of some feminists' research, which overlook the voice of these Orthodox women and come to the conclusion of being oppressed without enough study.

Kaufman, Debra, (1987). Coming Home to Jewish Orthodoxy: Reactionary or Radical Women? *Tikkun*, 2(3), pp.60-63.

This essay is based on Kaufman's interview with over a hundred women who return to Orthodox Judaism in US. The significance of her study is that, instead of valuating these women's life with feminist theories as an outsider, she gives voice to their wide range of experiences. Different to the general critique about patriarchy, she

gives credit to these female returners and thinks highly of their roles inside the tradition. Yet she is also able to realize dialectically the limitation under such feminist version.

Kaufman, Debra, (1993). *Rachel's Daughters: Newly Orthodox Jewish Women*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan.

This book is an extension of Kaufman's essay above, where she gives a more thorough analysis of the reasons these women chose to return to orthodoxy, and their role within orthodoxy. This book provides great detail to this guide; yet in a sense, the author seems to totally identify with her interviewees' positive attitude towards Orthodox tradition, which might need further discussion.

Brown, Karen (1994), Fundamentalism and the Control of Women, in *Fundamentalism and Gender*, edited by John Stratton Hawley, Oxford.

In this essay, Brown tends to argue that fundamentalism usually contains certain control and oppression on women. She looks from a psychology angle to show how fundamentalism is related to a conservative ideology of gender. As this essay does not give a specific illustration on Judaism, basically I use it as a background information of the guide.