



Vayera

Vol. 11, Issue 8 • 19 Cheshvan 5786 / October 30, 2026

CONTENTS: Shalev (Page 1); Gotlib (Page 10)

This month's Lehrhaus Over Shabbat is dedicated in loving memory of Mrs. Livia Turkel, Chaya Sara bas Eliyahu, on the occasion of her sixth yahrzeit. A woman who cherished tefillah and Torah learning, she dedicated her life to Jewish education. Sponsored by Brenda and Elihu Turkel and family.

Sponsorships for future editions of Lehrhaus over Shabbat are available at <https://thelehrhaus.com/sponsor-lehrhaus-shabbos/>

Beyond the Shadow of Replacement: The Resilience of Jewish Identity and Covenant

Avraham Russell Shalev directs the International Law Department at the Kohelet Policy Forum in Jerusalem.

During Tucker Carlson's combative interview with the American ambassador to Israel, Mike Huckabee, Carlson challenged Huckabee on the right of Jews to live in Israel. Carlson questioned whether modern-day Israeli Jews share any genetic relation to the ancient Israelites, calling for all Israeli Jews to undergo DNA testing. Carlson, probably the most influential antisemite in the United States, was channeling an ancient calumny

leveled for millennia against the Jewish people – that today's Jews are not the true Jews.¹ This libel takes many forms – that God has rejected and replaced the Jewish people, that the Jews falsified Scripture, or, Carlson's favorite trope, that modern Jews are really Khazars, a Central Asian tribe that may have converted to Judaism in the 8th century.

What unites these diverse ideologies is a shared tendency to reduce the Jewish people to secondary actors within their own expansive worldviews. Whether viewing Jews merely as a symbolic prefiguration that validates the Gospel, as "book-bearers" of their own supposed error, or

¹ ["Tucker Confronts Mike Huckabee on America's Toxic Relationship With Israel"](#) (Feb. 20, 2026).

as universalist enemies of modern nationalism, these frameworks leave no room for Jewish personal agency. By casting Jews in these predetermined roles, supersessionist thought – whether religious or secular – denies the Jewish people the right to continue and define their own story on their own terms.

Roots of Resilience: The Eternal Bond and Ancient Covenant

Traditional Judaism believes that God chose the forefathers of the Jewish people, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and later entered an eternal covenant with their descendants, the Children of Israel. The Book of Exodus ([19:5](#)) lays out the terms of God's promise before the Revelation at Sinai: "If you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine."² The Covenant is expressed by the Jewish people's receiving the laws of the Torah and the promise of the land of Israel.

The books of the Prophets, spanning from the entry into the Land under Joshua through the return from the Babylonian exile, detail the Jewish people's persistent failings and breaches of the Covenant. With great pathos, the Prophets describe God as raging like a jealous husband and a betrayed father at the disloyalty of His beloved people. In one of many such statements, the Prophet Jeremiah ([31:36-37](#)) has God swear: "If these laws [the natural laws] depart from before Me, says the Lord, so will the seed of Israel cease

being a nation before Me for all time.' So said the Lord: 'If the heavens above will be measured and the foundations of the earth below will be fathomed, I too will reject all the seed of Israel because of all they did, says the Lord.'"³

While many secular Jews may not share traditional Jewish notions of chosenness and divine promise, they continue to affirm the Jewish people's continued role in history. In 1961, the Israeli ambassador to the UN, Yaakov Herzog (and uncle of the current Israeli president, Isaac Herzog) debated the British historian Arnold Toynbee, who had claimed that the Jewish people were simply a preserved fossil. According to Herzog, the reestablishment of the State of Israel was the Jewish people's assertion of their will to live, despite attempts at their annihilation. Herzog, in one of his speeches, said:

How has the Jewish People, a third of whose sons and daughters were led to slaughter only a half-century ago in endless humiliation, in unmitigated cruelty, who were at the nadir of their fortunes, flung to the abyss of a cruel and merciless fate – whence do they rise again, phoenix-like, with force, with vigor, with faith and regain the capital of their eternity, Jerusalem?

... Israel represents a vindication of faith and prayer through the ages;

² Sefaria translation.

³ Chabad.org translation.

it is a symbol of revival, a message of hope, indeed lasting evidence of the integrity of the spirit.⁴

The Verus Israel Myth: Foundations of Christian Replacement Theology

Former Miss California, Carrie Prejean Boller, insisted before the Religious Liberty Commission that she was a Catholic and therefore opposed to Zionism.⁵ Prejean Boller was drawing on ancient Christian beliefs, insisting on the rejection of the Jewish people. Candace Owens, another conservative activist and antisemitic conspiracy theorist, frequently asserts that Christian doctrine denies Jews a homeland.⁶

In the second century CE, the Church Fathers articulated the theology of supersessionism, according to which the Jewish people had been excluded from God's grace for refusing to accept Christ, whose coming had supposedly been foretold by the Jewish Scriptures themselves. Instead of the Jewish people, who may have been carnal descendants of Abraham, the followers of Christ were *Verus Israel*, the True Israel of the spirit. Around the year 160, Justin Martyr imagined a dialogue with a Jew named Trypho.⁷ In this early example of Replacement theology, Justin

told Trypho that the Law of Moses was obsolete and that the Church had inherited the promises made to Israel. In fact, Jewish suffering and dispossession were signs of divine punishment for their failure to recognize the truth of Christianity.

Tertullian, one of the founders of Western Christianity, continued Justin Martyr's polemical tradition against the Jews. Tertullian expounds on Judaism as a prefiguration, or a carnal symbol, hinting at Jesus' ultimate coming. According to this theology, the biblical commandment of circumcision, which Jews practice until this day, is really a sign for spiritual circumcision of the heart. Judaism's role is to serve as a typology for Christianity's ultimate truth.

Tertullian, in his *Apology* (*Apologeticus*), emphasized that Jewish exile was retribution for deicide:

"In former times the Jews enjoyed much of God's favor... But how deeply they have sinned, puffed up to their fall with a false trust in their noble ancestors, turning from God's way into a way of sheer impiety, though they themselves

⁴ Jacob Herzog and Arnold Toynbee, *Transcript of a Debate Between Mr. Yaacov Herzog, Israeli Ambassador to Canada, and Prof. Arnold Toynbee, on Arab-Israeli Relations and Israel Refugee Policy* (Atlas, 1961), Herzog's closing remarks.

⁵ Religious Liberty Commission, [Transcript, Fifth Hearing of the Religious Liberty Commission, Parts I & II](#), Testimony of

Carrie Prejean Boller, U.S. Department of Justice (February 9, 2026), 27.

⁶ See Mark Tooley, "[We Need a New Defense of Christian Zionism](#)," *The Dispatch* (July 26, 2026).

⁷ Justin Martyr, [Dialogue with Trypho](#) (c. 155-160 CE).

should refuse to admit it, their present national ruin would afford sufficient proof. Scattered abroad, a race of wanderers, exiles from their own land and clime, they roam over the whole world without either a human or a heavenly king, not possessing even the stranger's right to set so much as a simple footstep in their native country.”⁸

Augustine of Hippo, writing in the fourth century CE, explained the continued existence of the Jewish people despite their stubbornness and refusal to submit to Christianity. For Augustine, the Jews were a living witness to the truth of the Scriptures and the Gospel. He argued that Jews should not be killed or forcibly converted but rather preserved in a state of visible subjugation. He interpreted their diaspora and the loss of their Temple as divine punishment for the rejection of Christ; thus, their presence – and their adherence to the Old Testament – demonstrated to the world that the prophecies regarding Jesus were ancient and authentic, not inventions of the later Church. By maintaining their traditional laws without the “spiritual” understanding Augustine claimed for Christians, the Jewish people were cast as “scriniaria” (book-bearers), carrying the very

scriptures that, in Augustine's view, proved their own error and the Church's triumph.⁹

The theological significance of Jewish dispossession militated against Christian support for Jewish liberation. In January 1904, Theodor Herzl, the founder of the modern Zionist movement, tried to enlist Pope Pius X to support Jewish statehood. Pius' reply was blunt: “The Jews have not recognized our Lord, therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people,” with the concluding remark, “If you come to Palestine and settle your people there, we will have churches and priests ready to baptize all of you.”¹⁰ Catholic frostiness towards Zionism continued even after the State of Israel was established in 1948. In 1964, [Pope Paul VI](#) took the first papal trip to the State of Israel. Throughout, however, he refused to utter the word “Israel,” billing it simply “the Holy Land.” He refused to meet the Sephardic Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Nissim and would not step foot in Western Jerusalem, Israel's capital.

Of course, theological anti-Zionism and supersessionism are not the only Christian positions. In the sixteenth century, many Protestants anticipated the Jewish people's return to their homeland. These beliefs formed the basis of later Christian Zionism, which became a

⁸ [Tertullian, Apology, ch. 21.](#)

⁹ Augustine, [Against Faustus, bk. 12](#), ch. 23; Augustine, *City of God*, bk. 18, chs. 46-47; [Augustine, Exposition on Psalm 59](#), §§15-18; [Jeremy Cohen, Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity](#) (University of California Press, 1999); Paula Fredriksen, [Augustine and the Jews: A](#)

[Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism](#) (Yale University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Theodor Herzl, *The Complete Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Raphael Patai (Herzl Press & Thomas Yoseloff, 1960), vol. V, 1601–1605.

powerful movement in the twentieth century.¹¹ As for Catholics, the Church issued the *Nostra aetate* declaration in 1965, according to which “the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God.”¹² To mark the 50th anniversary of *Nostra aetate*, the Church in 2015 released a document called “*the Gifts and Calling of God are Irrevocable*,”¹³ in which it affirmed that the covenant God made with the Jewish people was never revoked or replaced by the Christian covenant. Because God is faithful, His promises to Israel remain valid and active.

Subjugation and Stolen Legacy: The Islamic Framework of Supersessionism

Islam understands itself as the final revelation, completing and perfecting what was originally prophesied in the Torah and Gospels. The Qur’an addresses itself in many places to Jews and Christians, calling upon them to recognize Islam as confirmed by their own Scriptures. As the Qur’an states in the Chapter of the Women: “O you who have been given the Scripture! Believe in what We have revealed, confirming what is (already) with you...”¹⁴

Confronted with the reality that Jews rejected the message of Islam, Muslim scholars developed the concept of *tahrif*, according to which Jews (and Christians) falsified the Scriptures and expunged references to Muhammad’s ultimate coming.¹⁵ Like Christianity’s claim to be the true Israel, Islam appropriated for itself the true legacy of Abraham, the prophet. In *Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān*, the Qur’an rejects any claim the Jews may have to the Jewish prophets. According to the Qur’an, “Abraham was not a Jew, nor yet a Christian, rather he was a Muslim *hanif* (monotheist), and not one of those who associate other beings with God.”¹⁶ Jews are not privileged bearers of tradition but rather blind transmitters of the Scriptures: “The likeness of those who were charged with the Law of Moses, but who failed it, is as the likeness of an ass carrying great books.”¹⁷

The tenth-century Quranic exegete al-Tabari explained the history of the abrogation of Judaism: “The faith of the Jews prescribed cleaving to the Torah and to the *sunna* (tradition) of Moses until Jesus came. Once Jesus came... whoever did not reject these and follow Jesus was

¹¹ See “[Christian Zionism](#),” *Britannica*.

¹² Second Vatican Council, [Nostra Aetate \(Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions\)](#), (28 October 1965), para. 4.

¹³ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “[The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable](#)” (*Rom 11:29*): [A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of Nostra Aetate \(No. 4\)](#), (10 December 2015).

¹⁴ Qur’an, *Sūrat al-Nisā’* (4):47.

¹⁵ See “[Tahrif](#),” *Al-Islam.org*.

¹⁶ Qur’an, *Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān* (3):67.

¹⁷ Qur’an, *Sūrat al-Jumu‘ah* (62):5.

condemned to perdition... Once Muhammad came, whoever of them did not follow Muhammad... was lost.”¹⁸ In sum, Judaism is an annulled faith, no longer valid since Muhammad’s revelation.

The price of Jewish disobedience was political subjugation, as mandated by the Qur’an: “Fight those who do not believe in Allah and the Last Day, nor comply with what Allah and His Messenger have forbidden, nor embrace the religion of truth from among those who were given the Scripture, until they pay the tax, willingly submitting, fully humbled.”¹⁹ Though not always followed in practice, Islam mandated that Jews (and Christians) be humbled or humiliated, forced to pay the discriminatory *jizyah* tax. This subjugated status, known as *dhimmi*, continues to color Muslim attitudes towards Jewish sovereignty in Israel. Ibn Kathir, a prominent Muslim commentator in the fourteenth century, held that the Children of Israel are to be plagued with eternal humiliation: “They will continue to suffer humiliation at the hands of those who interact with them, along with the disgrace that they feel inwardly.”²⁰

¹⁸ [Al-Tabarī, Jāmi’ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl āy al-Qur’ān, commentary on Qur’ān](#) 2:62, vol. 2, 40–45.

¹⁹ Qur’an, Sūrat al-Tawbah (9):29 (trans. Mustafa Khattab, *The Clear Quran*).

²⁰ [Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Aẓīm](#), commentary on Qur’an 2:61.

²¹ Hassan Ma’moun, “Speech at the Inauguration of the Fourth Conference,” in *The Fourth Conference of the*

Much of the Arab and Muslim war against the State of Israel is driven by the contradiction between Jewish power and their divinely mandated lowly status. Following the Arab defeat in 1967, the Fourth Conference of the Academy of Islamic Research convened in Cairo in 1968 to discuss the religious meaning of the Israeli victory and the wider war against Israel. In his inaugural address, Sheikh Hassan Ma’moun, the grand imam of Al-Azhar, noted the “bitterness” of the Arab defeat, describing those whom the Qur’an describes as having “humiliation and wretchedness stamped upon them.”²¹ In a lengthy paper submitted to the conference, Muhammad El-Sayyed Husein al-Dahabi explicitly invoked al-Tabari, who stated that the Jewish people had lost their state due to their killing of the Prophets, highlighting the theological illegitimacy of Israel’s very existence.²²

On October 7, 2023, Hamas perpetrated the worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust. Until his passing in 2022, Egypt’s Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a Muslim Brotherhood ideologue and one of the most influential modern Sunni scholars, served as Hamas’ spiritual authority. Qaradawi explicitly

Academy of Islamic Research (Cairo: General Organization for Government Printing Offices, 1970), 2.

²² Muhammad El-Sayyed Husein al-Dahabi, “Israelite Narratives in Exegesis and Tradition,” in *The Fourth Conference of the Academy of Islamic Research* (Cairo: General Organization for Government Printing Offices, 1970), quoted in D. F. Green, ed., *Arab Theologians on Jews and Israel: Extracts from the Proceedings of the Fourth Conference of the Academy of Islamic Research*, 3rd ed. (Geneva: Editions de l’Avenir, 1976), 68.

framed the Arab-Israel conflict as a [religious struggle](#) between Islam and Judaism. Palestine is the “land of prophecy and blessing,”²³ with Islam superseding Judaism’s claim to the land. According to Qaradawi, the Qur’an recounts in great detail the stories of the Children of Israel to warn Muslims of their fundamentally corrupt and evil nature. On one hand, Arabs are descendants of Ishmael, Abraham’s eldest son and the true heir to the divine promise, while Jews descend from Isaac, the younger brother. At the same time, modern Palestinians are the descendants of the ancient Canaanites, while today’s Jews are Khazars and thus unrelated to the biblical Children of Israel.

Unlike Christian supersessionism, there has yet to be a Muslim *Nostra aetate*. Following the October 7 massacre, Israeli rabbi Oury Cherki wrote an [open letter](#) that he sent to thousands of Islamic scholars worldwide,²⁴ taking the faith to task for its attitudes towards Judaism. Rabbi Cherki was eventually invited to the [United Arab Emirates](#), where he discussed religious dialogue with senior political and religious leaders. Only time will tell whether such efforts will lead to new Islamic approaches towards Jews and Judaism.

The Pseudoscience of Erasure: Modern Secular Myths and the Khazar Hypothesis

The anti-Israel movement has adopted many of the same tropes and claims around the origins and history of the Jewish people, turning Jews into colonial interlopers while framing Palestinians as the real Israelites. This can be seen most prominently in the annual Christmas-time insistence that Jesus was a Palestinian.²⁵ While classical theology claims that Jews were spiritually replaced and secular myths claim that they are biological impostors, both rely on the exact same premise: that today’s Jews are ‘fake’ Jews with no valid claim to their own legacy. In this sense, modern identity erasure is simply secular supersessionism, swapping theological rejection for pseudo-scientific denial to strip the Jewish people of their historical continuity.

Although the twentieth century brought about the decline of organized religion in the Western world, the insistence that today’s Jews are impostors has found new, ostensibly scientific language. In September 2023, speaking at a Fatah conference in Ramallah, Palestinian Authority Chairman [Mahmoud Abbas](#) said about the Jews: “The truth that we should clarify to the world is that European Jews are not Semites. They have nothing

²³ Yusuf al-Qaradawi, “[Jerusalem: Land of Ribāt and Jihad](#)” [Ar.], Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi website.

²⁴ Oury Cherki, “[A Bridge between Faiths: An Open Letter to Islam, Part 1](#),” Noahide World Center (January 21, 2024).

²⁵ See, e.g., “[Abbas’ Christmas speech: Jesus was “a Palestinian messenger,”](#)” *Palestinian Media Watch* (December 23, 2013).

to do with Semitism. The story began in 900 CE, in the Khazar Kingdom on the Caspian Sea. It was a Tatar kingdom that converted to Judaism. [In the 11th century], this empire collapsed, and all its population fled to the north and to the west. They left for Russia and Western and Eastern Europe. There they spread, and are the forefathers of Ashkenazi Jews.”²⁶ The Khazar hypothesis is regularly promoted on all corners of the Internet, by progressives, neo-Nazi racists, Christian nationalists and Islamic jihadists.

According to many medieval sources, some Khazars, a Turkic people living in the northern and central Caucasus, converted to Judaism in the eighth and ninth centuries. The Khazar origin theory holds that after the collapse of the Khazar empire, the Khazars fled to Eastern Europe, where they became the ancestors of Ashkenazi Jews. Although the theory was mentioned as early as 1808, it gained wider popularity with the publication of Arthur Koestler’s book *The Thirteenth Tribe* in 1976.²⁷ Koestler, himself a Hungarian Jew, explicitly intended to weaken European antisemitism by demonstrating that Ashkenazi Jews were of European rather than Levantine ancestry. Ironically, his book found a warm reception in the Arab world for supposedly

disproving a Jewish connection to Israel, as well as in neo-Nazi circles. It is often insisted, as the other side to the Khazar claim, that the Palestinian Arabs are the true descendants of the biblical Israelites.²⁸

In 2009, Shlomo Sand, a historian of modern France at Tel Aviv University, wrote *The Invention of the Jewish People*,²⁹ which gave a new twist to the Khazar myth. The book, which also found a large following in the Arab world, claims that there was no exile of Jews from Israel under the Romans. Jewish communities outside Israel originate in mass conversions of local populations, as opposed to Jewish exiles from Israel. Sand calls Jewish peoplehood a modern myth invented in the nineteenth century by Jewish intellectuals influenced by German romanticism.

Another version of secular supersessionism attacks the [Hebrew language](#) as an artificial language completely disconnected from biblical Hebrew. According to this theory, Hebrew was a dead language until it was revived by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda in the nineteenth century. Hebrew is really a European language, or (its complete opposite) a stolen mishmash of Arabic, and Hebrew’s fake nature is proven by the fact that modern Israelis

²⁶ Ehud Yaari, “[Abbas and the Khazar Claim: Separating Myth from Fact](#),” Washington Institute for Near East Policy (September 12, 2023).

²⁷ [Arthur Koestler, *The Thirteenth Tribe: The Khazar Empire and Its Heritage*](#) (Hutchinson, 1976).

²⁸ See, e.g., “[Zionist FAQs: Genetic Distances of Modern Communities from Ancient Israelites](#),” *PalestineRemembered.com*.

²⁹ Shlomo Sand, [The Invention of the Jewish People](#), trans. Yael Lotan (Verso, 2009).

do not use “Semitic” pronunciations.

In reality, the Khazar theory has been largely debunked by modern [genetic](#) studies.³⁰ The genetic origins of modern Jewish populations point to a foundational ancestral root in the Levant. Large-scale genomic studies have consistently shown that, despite centuries of geographical dispersion, major Jewish diaspora groups – including Ashkenazi, Sephardic, and Mizrahi Jews – share a significant portion of their ancestry with ancient and modern Levantine populations. Genetic markers on the Y chromosome and mitochondrial DNA, as well as autosomal data, reveal that these groups are often more closely related to one another and to non-Jewish Middle Easterners than to the European or North African populations among whom they lived. While historical migrations led to varying degrees of admixture with local host populations, the persistent “Levantine signature” remains a core biological link to the Iron Age Near East, reflecting the common Mediterranean origin of these communities.

Modern Hebrew was never a dead language before the nineteenth century. For centuries, religious commentary and correspondence among Jewish communities were written in Hebrew. During the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry (950-1150), both religious and secular Hebrew poetry flourished. During the Enlightenment of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Jewish

intellectuals adopted Hebrew as the language of modern literature. Prior to Ben-Yehuda, spoken Hebrew had developed as the lingua franca of the diverse Jewish communities in Ottoman Jerusalem. Though Modern Hebrew has incorporated loanwords from European and Arabic sources—a common trait of all evolving languages – its core grammatical structure and three-consonant root system remain consistent with Ancient Hebrew. Furthermore, the relationship between the modern and ancient forms is close enough that modern speakers can generally understand the Hebrew Bible, much as a modern English speaker can navigate Shakespeare. Ultimately, the evolution of Hebrew represents a continuous linguistic chain rather than a rupture, serving as a primary cultural and biological link for the Jewish people to their ancestral Levantine origins.³¹

The emphasis on Jewish genetic origin reflects European blood-and-soil nationalism, which claims that Jews are too racially impure to merit statehood. While modern political Zionism emerged in nineteenth-century Europe as a response to antisemitism and assimilation pressures, its foundations are deeply rooted in a spiritual, religious, and national connection to the Land of Israel spanning thousands of years. The term “Zion” – originally referring to a specific part of Jerusalem and the site of the Holy Temple – serves as a broader symbol for the city and the entire land. Jewish identity uniquely integrates

³⁰ Judy Siegel-Itzkovich, “[Gene Tests Show That Two Fifths of Ashkenazi Jews Are Descended from Four Women](#),” *BMJ* 332 (2006): 140.

³¹ See Lewis Glinert, [The Story of Hebrew](#) (Princeton University Press, 2017).

religion and nationality; this collective identity is sustained by an ancient covenant, a shared destiny, and traditional customs, ranging from daily prayers for restoration to the symbolic vow “Next year in Jerusalem.” This enduring bond is anchored in both sacred scripture and the historical reality of Jewish sovereignty over the centuries before the Babylonian and Roman conquests. Furthermore, this connection is woven into the Jewish calendar itself, as the holidays and commandments (such as the Three Pilgrimage Festivals) are intrinsically tied to the agricultural cycles and seasons specific to the Land of Israel.

The Phoenix of Sovereignty: Existing on Jewish Terms

Zionism is precisely the Jewish insistence on existing on Jews’ own terms – not as prefigurations of another faith, fossilized remnants of a prior revelation, or a babel of pretenders without a shared history. For this reason, Christian, Islamic, and secular imperialists deny Jews the right to statehood. Jewish sovereignty so offends the supersessionists of many stripes because it rejects the role they have carved out for Jewish legitimacy.

Religious Jews may credit this to God’s continued adherence to His covenant with the People of Israel, while secular Jews may attribute it to more worldly causes. More than 7,000,000 Jews live in Israel, making it the largest Jewish community in the world and accounting for half of the global Jewish population. Israel has been independent

for nearly eight decades, and the overwhelming majority of Israeli Jews have never known any other home. Zionism testifies to the Jewish people’s commitment to renewal and rebirth. Whether viewed as the fulfillment of an ancient divine covenant or a secular triumph of the human spirit, the reestablishment of the State of Israel serves as enduring evidence of a continuous historical, cultural, and biological journey back to its ancestral Hebrew roots.

Halakhic Egalitarianism and the Future of Orthodoxy

Steven Gotlib is Associate Rabbi at Mekor Habracha/Center City Synagogue and Director of the Center City Beit Midrash in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, having previously held rabbinic positions in Toronto, Ottawa, and New York City.

Review of Rabbi Ethan Tucker and Rabbi Micha’el Rosenberg, [*Gender Equality and Prayer in Jewish Law: Revised and Updated Edition*](#) (Hadar Press, 2025)¹

The 2021 second edition of Professor Tamar Ross’s [*Expanding the Palace of Torah*](#) featured an epilogue reflecting on how the religious landscape had changed since its initial publication in 2004. One phenomenon that Ross noted was the proliferation of “partnership *minyanim*” in which women receive *aliyot*, read from the Torah, and lead non-mandatory parts of the prayer service

¹ All in-text citations are from the volume under review.

while maintaining a *mehitzah* separating the genders. Such *minyanim* have gradually increased in popularity throughout Modern Orthodoxy to the point that nearly every major community has one meeting at least monthly.²

“Nevertheless,” Ross wrote, “although partnership *minyanim* have achieved some degree of grudging tolerance from mainstream Orthodoxy, prophets of doom who warned against the slippery slope effect of this prayer format and its concessions to egalitarianism are now finding their worst fears realized.”³ She continues:

...Over the course of time, these practices have extended in a few of the partnership *minyanim* to blanket acceptance of women as leaders for *all* communal prayers; according women of priestly or Levite descent ritual privilege equal to that of their male counterparts; including women in the minimum count of ten required for a *minyan*, or at least waiting for a quorum of ten women after the requirement of ten men has been fulfilled; and even doing away with the symbolically loaded bottom-line requirement of praying with a *mehitzah*. For some members of the partnership movement, the

varying positions on these options among different *minyanim* rather than the legitimacy of the partnership format itself are now the live issues animating their struggle for gender equity. While still continuing to use the traditional Orthodox prayer book (rather than revised editions of the Conservative or Reform movements’ books), otherwise fully egalitarian *minyanim* render the original compromise of partnership *minyanim*—adhering to Orthodox methods of implementing change— inadequate to its task. Furthermore, in their willingness to rely on halakhic reasoning that does not stem from authoritative, commonly accepted Orthodox sources and blatantly diverges from traditional precedent, their efforts exhibit a new and striking disregard for maintaining denominational borders that characterized the endeavors of halakhic feminism in the past.⁴

Ross credits R. Ethan Tucker and R. Micha’el Rosenberg’s *Gender Equality and Prayer in Jewish Law* (Ktav, 2017) as “the most articulate defense

² See Jofa’s [Partnership Minyanim](#) page for a directory of such *minyanim*.

³ Tamar Ross, [Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism](#), 2nd ed. (Brandeis University Press, 2021), 263.

⁴ Ibid.

of full-fledged egalitarianism from a halakhic point of view, generally relied upon by proponents of this position.”⁵ [Hadar](#), the non-denominational organization for which Tucker serves as president and *rosh yeshiva*, empowers hundreds each year “to create and sustain vibrant, practicing, egalitarian communities of Torah, Avodah, and Hesed.”

In the near-decade since the book’s release to the general public,⁶ Hadar has significantly expanded its operations in North America and Israel, including establishing a rabbinic ordination program. Its impact is felt within much of the liberal Modern Orthodox world. Hadar Press’s newly expanded edition of *Gender Equality and Prayer in Jewish Law* makes this an ideal time to examine the reception of its arguments within Modern Orthodoxy and chart potential paths forward.

The Halakhic Egalitarian Argument in a Nutshell

Per the new edition’s preface, *Gender Equality and Prayer in Jewish Law* was first published to “help those who are exploring greater gender inclusivity in Jewish prayer for the first time” (1) and to aid

“those who are already deeply enmeshed in halakhic egalitarian practice” by providing them a methodology that understands “all of the voices of halakhic conversation as binding, even if their specific conclusions may be culturally conditioned” (2).⁷

To their credit, Tucker and Rosenberg appreciate that readers “with a prior presumption of gendered rules” (that is, coming from an Orthodox background) will find that “the most convincing and reassuring path for exploring gender-egalitarian practice is one that does not require large reworking of broad conceptual frameworks... but rather one that sticks to the close reading of premodern texts and their implications for halakhic practice” (1). Their argument is then structured modularly, such that readers are free to accept premises they find compelling up to any point. Tucker himself noted in an interview with Professor Alan Brill that Orthodox people sometimes tell him “they can buy the conclusions of part I of the book—full equality of leadership of the service—but not part II—full equality of citizenship through *minyan*,” which may be “the right next step” for some communities.⁸

⁵ Ibid., 341 n72.

⁶ It was initially available as a *teshuvah* on the Hadar website for some time.

⁷ This is framed slightly differently than the three originally expressed goals of the book:

1. to clarify misconceptions and dismiss red herrings that often cloud discussions on this topic;
2. to provide a sound basis for understanding the halakhic consequences of various positions related to gender and prayer; and

3. to provide a unifying discourse that can make sense of both egalitarian and non-egalitarian practices in Jewish prayer and enable proponents of both to be able to share a unified halakhic conversation despite their divergent practical conclusions. (13)

⁸ Alan Brill, “[Interview with Rabbi Ethan Tucker](#),” *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions*, September 7, 2017.

Relatedly, *Gender Equality and Prayer in Jewish Law* explicitly sidesteps the question of *mehitzah*, which has served as, in the words of Professor Lawrence Grossman, “the criterion for Orthodox authenticity, the boundary marker between Modern Orthodoxy and Conservatism” since the 1950s.⁹ Tucker and Rosenberg believe it “possible to have separate conversations about gender equality on the one hand, and the mixing or separation of the genders in public space, on the other” (16). They ultimately affirm that “delicate questions of whether equality should be played out through mixed-gender practices as opposed to separate-gender ones can—and must—be assessed community by community, with great sensitivity to the social context” (193).¹⁰ In theory, it might well be possible within their framework to have a fully egalitarian minyan with a *mehitzah* still in place.¹¹

Let us now briefly examine the case made by Tucker and Rosenberg for full egalitarianism. Their initial argument for women to serve as *shelihot tzibbur* is three-pronged:

1. “There is no solid basis for any claim that women are, by dint of the fact that they are women, any less obligated than men in

prayer” (47).

2. “A fully egalitarian Torah reading can justify itself without reevaluating assumptions and categories by simply endorsing the approach... that allows communities to waive *kevod tzibbur*” (92).¹²
3. “There is no strong textual or conceptual background to any claim that tries to make *devarim shebikdushah* [*barekhu*, *kaddish*, and *kedushah*] gendered” (123). Furthermore, “[e]ven working with a model of vicarious fulfillment, there is no reason to assume a gender gap... these rituals are rooted in the obligations to sanctify God’s name (*kiddush hashem*) and to pray (*tefillah*), in which women have equal obligation” (126).

Thus, Tucker and Rosenberg argue that the primary concerns around women serving as full prayer leaders are those of “custom and stability” rather than Halakhah (127).

The argument for counting women in a *minyan* is more complex, with Tucker and Rosenberg presenting two different approaches in parallel.

⁹ Lawrence Grossman, [*Living in Both Worlds: Modern Orthodox Judaism in the United States, 1945–2025*](#) (Academic Studies Press, 2025), 77.

¹⁰ The topic of *mehitzah* is directly addressed by Tucker here: [“Good Fences Make Good Neighbors?”](#) Hadar Institute.

¹¹ Friends report that Hadar’s Israeli operation utilizes a tri-*hitzah* setup with separate sections for men, women, and mixed seating.

¹² This part of their argument is explicitly based on the work of R. Mendel Shapiro and R. Daniel Sperber in defense of partnership *minyanim*.

They first argue that Rabbenu Tam,¹³ Rabbenu Simhah,¹⁴ and Mordekhai¹⁵ seem to provide a framework in which “*minyan* is nothing less and nothing more than a convocation of ten people anchored to the Jewish people through ancestry or obligation and any such group is theoretically an appropriate manifestation of *benei yisrael*.” It must, however, “not violate the standard of יקרא דשמיא, ‘the honor of heaven,’ which captures the notion of a gathering that is objectively dignified and worthy of God’s serious attention” (157). Within such a framing, the question to be asked becomes: “Will the de-gendering of *minyan* be experienced as a cheapening of communal prayer in order to lower standards and increasing [sic] the participation of marginal members? Or will it be experienced as raising the dignity of communal prayer to keep it in line with the standards of gender equality that reflect the dignity and seriousness found elsewhere in society?” (192–93).

A second approach to *minyan* identified by Tucker and Rosenberg is that of Levush (R. Mordekhai ben Avraham Yoffe), whom they summarize as asking: Can those who are not fully obligated in *mitzvot* (such as women, slaves, and minors who are all less obligated than adult Jewish men) “possibly help constitute a microcosm of the Jewish people?” (162). Arguing for women to count in a *minyan* within that framework requires

a much broader argument. In their words,

One would need to argue that the term אשה, “woman,” in classical literature is sometimes used as a placeholder for a sociological status that women shared with slaves and minors in most times and places in human history. Under that reading, contemporary changes in the status of women have resulted in corollary shifts in women’s religious obligations such that they now are, through proper application of *halakhah*, maximally obligated Jews and thus self-evidently included in a *minyan* just like men. (193)

Following such a change in conceptual understanding, women would not only be able to count in a *minyan* but would also be maximally obligated in all positive time-bound *mitzvot*. It is this category-shift argument (often referred to as “paradigm shift”) with which Hadar’s approach has become most associated. The authors maintain, however, that “[i]n communities where distinctions between men and women remain strong generally, tampering with an all-male definition of *minyan* may weaken the status of communal prayer and the seriousness with which

¹³ *Tosafot R. Yehudah Sirleon on Berakhot 47b*. This does not appear in most printed Gemaras.

¹⁴ As quoted in Mordekhai on *Berakhot* 173.

¹⁵ *Berakhot* 158 and *Gittin* 401.

it is approached” (191).¹⁶

This new edition also includes a lengthy appendix showcasing examples throughout Jewish history in which “a claim that a certain object or action that was once properly classified under one rabbinic category has now shifted categories and the applied law should look different” (196). In the context of this book, it’s meant to justify the shift of women away from the Talmudic category of *nashim*, but the thirty-four-page appendix does not make that connection directly.¹⁷

¹⁶ This sort of argument seems to be supported by Yeshivat Har Etzion’s R. Yoel Bin-Nun, whose positions (cited by Tucker and Rosenberg) sometimes invoke similar language. Indeed, the authors relate that

In a personal communication, R. Bin-Nun confirmed that he would extend this logic [that “our women” are a different category than women of the past] to the realm of vicarious fulfillment; i.e., a woman in this category could blow *shofar* for a man. Interestingly, in discussing the concept of *minyan*, R. Bin-Nun says: “...It would seem that one can, in our day, follow the position of R. Tam.” R. Bin-Nun means this in the practical sense that R. Tam’s position theoretically allows for ten women to constitute the *minyan*. But the essence of R. Bin-Nun’s argument is in fact that contemporary women often have a different status than the women spoken of by Hazal, such that, according to R. Bin-Nun’s analysis, ten women can constitute a *minyan* even under the Levush’s theory (186 n77).

My friend R. Matthew Anisfeld pointed out to me that Bin-Nun’s framing predates that of Tucker and Rosenberg.

¹⁷ R. Ysoscher Katz has criticized this argument on the following basis: “While Rav Ethan indeed provides multiple proofs for the claim that rabbinic categories are culturally subjective, none of them, however, are categories with a specific basis in the Torah... The common denominator in

Before moving on to the volume’s reception within Modern Orthodoxy, it should be noted that one surprising, perhaps even ironic, aspect of this new edition of *Gender Equality and Prayer in Jewish Law* is the absence of any female contributions to the volume. The original printing suffered from this as well, but it was launched with a fascinating [panel discussion](#) featuring Rabbis Judith Hauptman and Joanna Samuels. One may have thought that this new edition would have included reflection from a woman associated with Hadar or otherwise involved in conversations around gender egalitarianism.¹⁸ This absence, of course,

these examples is that they are all rabbinic [sic] concepts or formulations, none of them is predicated on an explicit biblical formulation.” R. Ysoscher Katz [“Rabbi Ysoscher Katz Responds to Rabbi Ethan Tucker Interview,”](#) *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions*, September 13, 2017.

¹⁸ It is notable that the Conservative Movement’s most recent and most authoritative *teshuvah* on gender egalitarianism, [“Women and Mitzvot,”](#) is written by R. Dr. Pamela Barmash. Her conclusion is very similar to Tucker and Rosenberg’s:

The involvement of women in Jewish religious and liturgical life has changed significantly in the past century and even more in the past few decades. Jewish women are aspiring to the privileges and responsibilities enjoyed by Jewish men through the millennia. The halakhah has recognized that when social customs change significantly, the new social reality requires a reappraisal of halakhic practices. The historical circumstances in which women were exempted from time-bound positive mitzvot are no longer operative, and the Conservative movement has for almost a century moved toward greater and greater inclusion of women in mitzvot. In Jewish thought and practice, the highest rank and esteem is for those who are required to fulfill mitzvot. We rule therefore that women and men are equally obligated to observe the mitzvot. We call upon Conservative synagogues, schools, and camps to

does not detract at all from the book's substance. It is, however, unfortunate in light of Dr. Malka Simkovich's sharp critique of discourse around the first edition:

I follow discussions about women's ritual participation on social media and in print with interest, but also with detached bewilderment. The majority of these discussions are occurring between men, despite the fact that we are fortunate today to have plenty of women who are knowledgeable in rabbinic literature... I'm afraid that the most important question, Freud's question, gets overlooked in these discussions: What does a woman want?¹⁹

educate men and women in equal observance of mitzvot and to expect and require their equal observance of mitzvot. (Barmash, 32)

¹⁹ Malka Z. Simkovich, "[Malka Z. Simkovich Responds to Rabbi Ethan Tucker Interview](#)," *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions*, September 11, 2017. I am not oblivious to the fact that this review itself, written by a male rabbi, contributes to that reality.

²⁰ Jackie Hadjenberg, "[Is Hadar a New Denomination of Judaism in Light of Recent Growth?](#)," *The Jerusalem Post*, July 2, 2024. This is not to imply that Hadar is "pluralistic." Using its three-pronged framework, in which any space can embody only two of three values—pluralism, integrity, and community—Hadar prefers to be a community with integrity. See "[Pluralism, Integrity and Community: You Can't Have Them All, Part 2.](#)"

²¹ Tucker's stepfather was also Joe Lieberman, a Modern Orthodox U.S. senator and the 2000 Democratic vice-residential nominee. Tucker's eulogy for Lieberman can be read here: "[My Stepfather Joe Lieberman Set One Path as a](#)

Halakhic Egalitarianism's Orthodox Reception

Hadar does not identify with any particular denomination of Judaism. As quoted by *JTA*, Tucker and the institution he founded instead aim to present "a strong religious vision that has all the entire Jewish community as its audience."²⁰ Indeed, although Tucker is the son of a prominent leader of the Conservative Movement and received his PhD from the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), he also attended a Modern Orthodox gap-year program and received rabbinic ordination from the Israeli Chief Rabbinate.²¹ In his above-cited interview with Brill, Tucker expressed that he tends to see "allies everywhere, not competitors or rivals" when it comes to moving the overall community closer to egalitarianism.²² Rosenberg, at the book's [launch](#), similarly remarked that the excessive self-

[Jew in Politics. Will His Many Successors Follow It?](#)," *JTA*, July 26, 2024.

²² Discussion of how much credit the Conservative Movement can take for Hadar is beyond the scope of this essay. However, some Orthodox colleagues have shared that, based on their own experiences, Hadar seems to react primarily to aspects of the Conservative Movement and its institutions that its founders and participants interpret as flawed or soulless, rather than reacting to anything in the Orthodox world. Regarding the developments within Orthodoxy mentioned at the beginning of this essay, R. Dr. Neil Gillman of JTS wrote in the early 2000s: Orthodoxy, for its part, began to recognize Jewish women as halakhic authorities in their own right, and even allowed them to assume selected but significant liturgical and ritual roles. These developments should be appreciated [within Conservative Judaism] as a backhanded tribute to where we have located ourselves all along. (Rabbi Neil Gillman, [Doing Jewish Theology: God, Torah, & Israel in Modern Judaism](#) [Jewish Lights, 2008], 204)

awareness of breaking from tradition which characterizes so many of the “twentieth-century Modern Judaisms” does a disservice rather than an advantage.

The book’s initial reception by North American Modern Orthodoxy, to the extent that it was received within that world at all, was mixed. R. Ysoscher Katz of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School (YCT) said in his own interview with Brill that Torah and Midrash contain many statements that are “uttered by God... clearly about essentialist gender and not about a subjective social construct.” Therefore, “certain gender-based Halakhic distinctions, because of their biblical origin, will (unfortunately) continue in perpetuity. It will, of course, always trouble us, but we will never be able to change that. Our religious mandate, instead, is to, subserviently, accept the burden of divine capriciousness. Rav Ethan’s attempt to alleviate that burden, cannot work because we disagree on the fundamentals.”²³

In his review of the first edition of the book, my teacher R. Aryeh Klapper praised Tucker and Rosenberg for “clearing away the claim that halakhic change to the intersection of gender and prayer is theoretically impossible.” He also praised them for their “prima facie case that no one has

successfully articulated a convincing modern rationale for Orthodoxy’s gender-differentiated practice.” Klapper acknowledged that the book’s arguments are “halakhically conceivable” but that this does not mean any one is “halakhically compelling in and of itself.” For Klapper, the primary concern is “whether these proposals have enough authority to legitimate action on the part of those who buy into the underlying analysis.”²⁴

At the time, the extent of Hadar’s inroads in Modern Orthodox spaces was not obvious. Klapper’s conclusion, thus, was that Hadar’s place within the extended Orthodox community ought to be as a “loyal opposition” who are “entitled to keep agitating for change, but must recognize the authority of the legal status quo.”

In the intervening years, Hadar and the Halakhic Egalitarian approach that it champions seem to have been accepted as fellow travelers within the left flank of Modern Orthodoxy.²⁵ This is observable by the clear and unapologetic presence of Hadar’s vision and leadership in volumes published by that side of our community for external consumption. One example of this is the inclusion of an article by Tucker in a book published by Yeshivat Maharat (and authored/edited by one of the signatories of its *semikhah* certificate) defending the legitimacy of

²³ “[Rabbi Ysoscher Katz Responds to Rabbi Ethan Tucker Interview](#),” *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions*, September 13, 2017.

²⁴ Aryeh Klapper, “[Book Review-Gender Equality and Prayer in Jewish Law](#),” *The New York Jewish Week*, July 15, 2020.

²⁵ This is not to say that the left flank of Modern Orthodoxy is illegitimate or insufficiently Orthodox. Such arguments have been had *ad nauseum* throughout the past two decades and, in my view, are unproductive.

women's ordination. In it, Tucker argued that "the time has come where we cannot give a free pass to conversations that simply assume the biological/chromosomal meaning of נשים / women in all Jewish texts and then run away to questions of authority and tradition."²⁶ Tucker also presented on well-attended panels at the 2017 Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) conference, speaking about "[Rabbis and Feminism](#)" as well as "Blurred Boundaries" and "Post-Orthodoxy."²⁷

Where Do We Go from Here?

It would seem that there are two potential directions in response to the inroads Halakhic Egalitarianism continues to make within Modern Orthodoxy. The first is modeled by R. Mordechai Willig in a controversial *devar Torah*:

...In the words of a "pioneer of the religious feminist wave" cited in the [aforementioned article](#), "What is happening today is a direct continuation of the beginning of Talmud studies for religious women in the 1980's." This candid admission must, for the genuinely Orthodox, call into question the wisdom of these studies. Although there are ample reliable sources

that encourage individual women who have proper *yiras Shomayim* and whose motives are consistent with our *mesorah* to further their Torah study, the inclusion of Talmud in curricula for all women in Modern Orthodox schools needs to be reevaluated. While the *gedolim* of the twentieth century saw Torah study to be a way to keep women close to our *mesorah*, an egalitarian attitude has colored some women's study of Talmud and led them to embrace and advocate egalitarian ideas and practices which are unacceptable to those very *gedolim*.²⁸

In other words, one possibility is for the Modern Orthodox community to nip gender egalitarianism in the bud regardless of any halakhic rationale behind it. Certain innovations may well be halakhically acceptable but nonetheless inadvisable and thus ignored on principle in order to avoid religious discomfort.

A similar argument regarding partnership *minyanim* was made in 2001 by R. Yehuda Herzl Henkin, who felt that "if done without fanfare, an occasional *aliyyah* by a woman in a private *minyan*

²⁶ "Ethan Tucker's Response," in Rabbi Daniel Sperber, [Rabba, Maharat, Rabbanit, Rebbetzin: Women with Leadership Authority According to Halachah](#) (Yeshivat Maharat and Urim Publications, 2020), 190.

²⁷ [JOFA Conference 2017: Full Schedule](#). In the latter panel, he filled in at the last minute for his Hadar colleague, R. Dr. Shai Held.

²⁸ [Rabbi Mordechai Willig, "Trampled Laws," TorahWeb](#), 2015.

of men held on *Shabbat* in a home and not in a synagogue sanctuary or hall can perhaps be countenanced or at least overlooked.” Nevertheless, he *paskened* against such practices in synagogues on the basis of preventing a slippery slope:

Regardless of the arguments that can be proffered to permit women’s *aliyyot* today—that *kevod ha-tsibbur* can be waived, that it does not apply today when everyone is literate, that it does not apply when the *olim* rely on the (male) *ba`al qeri’ah* and do not themselves read—women’s *aliyyot* remain outside the consensus, and a congregation that institutes them is not Orthodox in name and will not long remain Orthodox in practice. In my judgement, this is an accurate statement now and for the foreseeable future, and I see no point in arguing about it.²⁹

The slippery slope from partnership *minyanim* to full egalitarianism feared by Henkin and reported above by Ross may be partially by design. In his editorial introduction to a 2010 volume published by JOFA in defense of women’s *aliyyot* (*Women and Men in Communal Prayer*), Dr. Chaim Trachtman

noted:

A thoughtful reader might protest that they have been misled by a mismatch between the cover and the contents of the book. However, in defense of the editorial choices that were made, *qeri’at ha-Torah* is both a highlight of Orthodox communal prayer and the first element of the service that has been subjected to widespread critical halakhic analysis regarding the possibility of modifying its performance to enable more complete participation by women... Any community that adopts the practice of *qeri’at ha-Torah* in the style of partnership *minyanim* is likely to be open to explore additional aspects of communal prayer that can be shared by women and men. Thus, this book should be seen as a first of many steps in a process to enhance the meaning and spirituality of communal prayer for women and men.³⁰

It is far from obvious that such a slope would come to a halt in the context of prayer rather than continue slipping into broader subjects. This is

²⁹ Yehuda Herzl Henkin, “[Qeri’at Ha-Torah by Women: Where We Stand Today](#),” *The Edah Journal* 1, no. 2 (Sivan 5761 [2001]).

³⁰ Chaim Trachtman, ed., [Women and Men in Communal Prayer: Halakhic Perspectives](#) (Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance and Ktav Publications, 2010), xviii.

evident in a contribution by R. Aviva Richman, Hadar's co-*rosh yeshiva*, in a volume published by Yeshivat Maharat addressing lesbian sexual intimacy in Halakhah. Richman notes:

...An approach to same-sex sexuality based on left-handedness articulated by my colleague and teacher R. Ethan Tucker leaves room for the heterosexually-focused *halakhic* discourse on sexuality to remain alive, albeit with the need for translation into one's own "orientation." Much of what Talmud and *halakha* have to say about practices rooted in right-handedness (e.g. laying *tefillin*) is still applicable to someone who is left-handed but requires an act of translation. So too, two women entering into marriage would inherit and be guided by Torah and *halakha's* approach to sexuality, including the substantive concerns behind *ma-aseh Eretz Mitzrayim* and *pritzut*, while translating these concerns into a different sexual orientation.³¹

She then goes on to offer her own framework for thinking through the subject, clearly in line spiritually with that expressed by Tucker and Rosenberg in *Gender Equality and Prayer in Jewish Law*:

It does a disservice to *halakha* and to religious people's experience to approach the material and analysis R. Fox brings to the table merely as the discovery of a *kula* (leniency) that establishes freedom from an *halakhic* stricture such that *halakha* has no more to say about female-female sexuality. The content surfaced through his analysis brings to our attention many fundamental aspects about the nature of sexuality and partnership that can be a source of learning for all Jews. When is sexual behavior *pritzut* and when is it *tzniut*? What kinds of sexual relationships are a *toevah* and why? What *halakhic* sources speak to the importance for everyone to have the option to pursue meaningful sexual intimacy and raise children in the context of a partnership that is conducive to happiness?³²

The *derekh ha-limmud* displayed by Richman clearly has its roots in the egalitarian framework espoused by Tucker and Rosenberg. The same formulations, with wording relevant to prayer

³¹ "Rabbi Aviva Richman," in Rabbi Jeffrey Fox, [*Nashim Mesolelot: Lesbian Women and Halakha: A Teshuva with Responses*](#) (Yeshivat Maharat and Ben Yehuda Press, 2024),

134–35. Tucker's article can be read here: ["Uniformity and Diversity: Left-Handedness and Halakhah."](#)

³² *Ibid.*, 135–36.

swapped in, would not at all be out of place in the latter half of *Gender Equality and Prayer in Jewish Law*. Once one is willing to countenance this sort of category reinterpretation, it is unreasonable to assume it would not be applied across various subjects.

Of course, the mere presence of Hadar's perspectives in outward-facing volumes published by Yeshivat Maharat does not necessarily entail agreement. It does, however, imply that such views are seen as acceptable to not only hold but to advocate for within that segment of Modern Orthodoxy. Were that not the case, the voices of Tucker and Richman would not have been included in either volume.³³

Given this degree of de facto coalescence, an alternative direction to consider is offered in Klapper's above-cited review of *Gender Equality and Prayer in Jewish Law*:

But for the role [of Halakhic Egalitarianism as a "loyal opposition" within Orthodoxy] to be meaningful, and therefore psychologically tolerable, it is vital that those who support the status quo genuinely listen to those who seek change, acknowledge that change is not inconceivable, and

indicate that they would themselves become a loyal opposition should change happen legitimately. Failure to do these things breeds cynicism, and then disengagement and/or rebellion.

One way forward may thus be for the liberal Modern Orthodox community to acknowledge this growing voice in our midst and allow history to play itself out naturally from there. If Halakhic Egalitarianism can be explicitly recognized as a legitimate internal voice, as it seems already to have been implicitly, we must prepare ourselves for the possibility of potentially becoming *their* loyal opposition in a world in which Orthodox self-identification has about as much to do with one's position on gender equality as it does with figuring out which *eruv* or *kashrut* agencies to hold by. That is to say, a question of significant religious importance but sociologically low-stakes in the grand scheme of things.

What might such a future look like? Professor Adam Ferziger wrote in 2015 that "it is not difficult to envision" a future in which the liberal Modern Orthodox world is pushed by the Orthodox Right "to form a new coalition with the growing trend toward nondenominationally affiliated synagogue communities that aim to be both fully egalitarian and halakhic" with "the intellectual base for this

³³ Both volumes featured dissenting opinions, of course. But it is obvious that such voices (the OU's position on women in clergy roles, included in Sperber's volume, for example)

are within the broader Orthodox camp, while one would not automatically make the same assumption about Hadar.

burgeoning coalition... found in the egalitarian yeshiva Mechon Hadar.”³⁴ Indeed, he noted even then the presence of events “jointly sponsored and staffed by YCT, Yeshivat Maharat, Drisha, and the non-Orthodox Mechon Hadar.”³⁵ More recently, Ferziger also noted that “Hadar has many faculty and participants in its programs who identify as Orthodox.”³⁶

One example of this is R. Yitz Greenberg. In 2022, he wrote a post on social media justifying participation in Hadar’s *shabbaton*:

Hadar is my fantasy of the future modern Orthodox community. Hadar is committed to Torah learning and full observance of mitzvot. At the same time, the principle of egalitarianism was so precious and important that they practiced it in the here and now, not in a distant future. I too believed in egalitarianism, but as my community had still not accepted it as determining their halachic practices, women were excluded from various religious

roles. I joined these services as part of being a member of this Hadar community. But I hoped in time that the Modern Orthodox community - which was, step by step, moving in this direction [=women Rabbis and maharats, partnership minyanim with women leading Kabbalat Shabbat services or Psukei D’Zimra prayer sections] would some day come to full participation of women and their leadership in all the services... just like Shabbat is a taste of the future Messianic perfection of the world, so I felt that the Hadar religious experience was a foretaste of a future progressive Orthodox community.³⁷

Indeed, YCT and Maharat founder R. Avi Weiss has himself advocated for “an inclusionary Orthodoxy that empowers women to be more involved in Jewish ritual and spiritual leadership; that invites religious questioning and promotes dialogue across the Jewish spectrum; welcomes people regardless of sexual orientation or level of

³⁴ Adam S. Ferziger, [*Beyond Sectarianism: The Realignment of American Orthodox Judaism*](#) (Wayne State University Press, 2015), 221.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 289 n77.

³⁶ Adam S. Ferziger, [*Agents of Change: American Jews and the Transformation of Israeli Judaism*](#) (NYU Press, 2025), 373 n19.

³⁷ [Facebook post by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg](#), December 12, 2022. Brackets in the original.

religious observance; and looks outward, driven by a sense of responsibility to all people,”³⁸ made up of the organizations he founded alongside “the more conservative wing of Hadar and the more progressive graduates of Chabad, Yeshiva University, and Yeshivat Har Etzion...”³⁹

At the end of the day, only time will tell whether Modern Orthodoxy has an egalitarian future.⁴⁰ As R. Dr. Sam Lebens has noted:

Many factors play a role in bringing the Torah closer to its heavenly paradigm. Social and political movements, other religions, and more directly, non-Orthodox denominations within the Jewish world, all play a role in awakening certain sensitivities and attitudes within the Orthodox community. Liberal segments of that community agitate for change within the halakha. Conservative elements within the same

community resist any change. The legal traditions themselves create obstacles to some changes, whilst being more amenable to other changes. The changes and evolutions that make it through this process can claim to be an echo of Sinai.⁴¹

In the meantime, Tucker and Rosenberg’s exploration of the question will have certainly succeeded in their goal to lead communities on both sides of the literal and metaphorical aisle “to a deeper understanding of their own practices, a sense of the underlying values that have guided these conversations throughout the centuries, and a profound desire to properly apply God’s eternal *mitzvot* to our personal and communal lives” (194).

Thank you to Chesky Kopel for editing, Ashley Stern Mintz for copyediting, and to several friends and colleagues from the Halakhic Egalitarian and Liberal Modern Orthodox orbits for offering

³⁸ Avraham “Avi” Weiss, [Journey to Open Orthodoxy](#) (Urim Publications, 2019), 80–81.

³⁹ Ibid., 82. Perhaps relatedly, in a [2018 interview](#) with R. Shmuly Yanklowitz, R. Asher Lopatin—then president of YCT—acknowledged belief that Orthodox Judaism would one day become fully egalitarian and mentioned casually that, in his opinion, women could lead *devarim she-bi-kedushah*.

⁴⁰ Admittedly, my gut instinct is negative. Even as Halakhic Egalitarianism continues to gain traction within the leftmost edge of Orthodoxy, the rest of the community is likely to follow in the footsteps of figures like Willig and Henkin.

Within the Orthodox left, if one cares enough about the label of Orthodoxy, there is no benefit to becoming a “loyal opposition” to Halakhic Egalitarianism. This may lead to a healthy middle group within American Jewish life but is unlikely to make inroads into centrist and right-wing Orthodoxy given how small the Orthodox left already is by comparison. Based on the statements within and publications from the left wing of Modern Orthodoxy surveyed here, Halakhic Egalitarianism is likely to at least remain an acceptable *yesh omrim* within that world for the foreseeable future.

⁴¹ Samuel Lebens, [The Principles of Judaism](#) (Oxford University Press, 2020), 218.

insightful comments as this article was written.

Managing Editor:

David Kollmar

Editors:

David Fried

Shayna Herszage-Feldan

Chesky Kopel

Chaya Sara Oppenheim

Consulting Editors:

Miriam Krupka Berger

Michael Bernstein

Elli Fischer

Miriam Gedwiser

Yosef Lindell

Chaim Saiman

Jeffrey Saks

Jacob J. Schacter

Sara Tillinger Wolkenfeld

Shlomo Zuckier

Please contact us at editors@thelehrhaus.com