LEHRHAUS

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Drawing The right Conclusions: Defense of a Recent Orthodox Survey

Zvi Grumet

Matt Williams critiques a study I recently conducted and publicized. His critique focuses on two main elements. First, that my work does not meet the standards of academic, statistically valid, social science research. The second is that the types of questions, language, and analysis I used reflect an inherent bias. Let me address each of those.

Williams is right. I am neither a professional social science researcher nor a statistician, and I do not pretend to be either one. I am an educator deeply concerned that we don't know enough about what we're doing in our educational systems and its long-term impact. I have spoken to hundreds, if not thousands, of students over the years and noticed certain patterns, particularly in the last 10-15 years. I thought it was important to find out if those patterns were true beyond my limited interactions. As such I undertook the study.

It was clear from the outset that using social media to disseminate the survey instrument would compromise the statistical purity of a truly random sample demanded by the academic community. I acknowledged that limitation in the beginning of my report, and in an addendum I later posted on the blog where the report first appeared. I acknowledged that there were clearly populations which were underrepresented. And despite that, I was and still am comfortable with that limitation, and I would probably do it again the same way.

The primary reason is practicality. Without significant funding *and* access to a database of Yeshiva high school graduates there was no reasonable way to reach and target this population. And although I have good relationships with many people deeply involved in Yeshiva high schools, I doubt that they would have released the names and contact information for their graduates for a plethora of good reasons.

It was because of this methodological limitation that I was careful in my report to emphasize that it represented nothing more than what the respondents reported. A quick search of the report will reveal that I used the word "respondents" 62 times (including seven times in the summary) to emphasize that point. Further, I made no specific recommendations for how the educational community should respond other to consider my findings as they deliberate how they plot their educational programming and messages.

This brings me to the motivation which drove me to undertake this this project. The Yeshiva high school system (it is more of a loose association of independent schools than a system) costs Jewish families upwards of $250 million annually, yet I am not aware of a single study done by the schools

regarding their long-term success in their Jewish program. In fact, it is not clear to me how they would even define long-term success. I am hoping that, in the wake of this study, the schools will begin to develop their own instruments to measure that success and use that data to reevaluate and refine what they teach and how they teach.

This is not what Williams calls "*Shabbos*-table" talk and is not directed at central agencies tasked with distributing large sums of money. This, in my opinion, should be the talk of board meetings, parent meetings, and faculty meetings of schools at the local level.

I believe that, despite the statistical limitation, the data in this study provides enough grounds to warrant beginning that kind of reflection process. I do not believe that the distinctions between Orthodox practice and Orthodox belief or between public and private observance revealed in the study are the products of an anomalous sample; I do not believe that the distinction between intimacy practice and other practice is an accident in the data; I do not believe that noticing shifts in religious behavior through various stages of life or movement in and out of Orthodox practice are the result of bad sampling.

It is hard to believe that two studies conducted in very different ways and with no contact with each other would find the same patterns based on the same accidental anomalies—rejecting those findings because they lack the elegance of statistical purity raises more questions about the rejection than about the studies. The numbers may not be precise, and I'm not convinced that the numbers of *any* survey are going to be precise, but that is not the point of this survey.

In many fields, including education, there is a research method known as action research, in which the practitioners gather data about their practice and its impact to inform future practice. That data would never stand up to the statistical demands Williams would require, nor should they. It is a different kind of research, one which provides data which is useful in real time. Action research, like social-media based research, are examples of new forms of gathering meaningful data quickly so that they can be used effectively. It may be frowned upon by the academy, but it has considerable value in making positive change before the data become irrelevant.

That being said, the demographic data do actually suggest that the respondent population is not completely skewed, which Williams might want us to believe. There is an almost 50-50 split between men and women. Two-thirds of the respondents were raised in the greater metropolitan NY area, with the rest scattered amongst 19 other regions with Jewish communities. Nearly 80 percent attended *Yeshivot*/seminaries in Israel. All this is fairly consonant with what we would expect in a completely random sample.

All the above relates to the purist, statistical critique.

But Williams critiques other elements of the survey as well. For example, he insists that there is questioning bias. In his words:

> The lens these researchers utilize to investigate and portray their subject—measuring a population against an "accepted" constellation of standards and the words used to describe them—comes with troubling implications. To name just two problems: first, the studies assume a constellation of "core" values but this does not allow for space or opportunity for participants to offer their own definitions of behaviors and beliefs. As a result, both surveys provide less data about the sampled population. Instead, they offer a rather skewed view of how these participants perceive themselves relative to these asserted standards.

While Williams decries "an 'accepted' constellation of standards and the words used to describe them," that is precisely what most of the Orthodox community, and I venture to say nearly all of Orthodox education, is built upon. To avoid using that accepted constellation would miss the point of the study—to what extent have the respondents bought into that constellation which is the warp and woof of the Jewish dialogue in the Orthodox educational world. I would assert that to sidestep the use of those terms would completely misunderstand and misrepresent this population.

Williams also critiques the analysis employed. In his example,

> To take one example, the Lookstein (*sic*) study writes that "while 93.9% required rabbinic kashrut certification for products in the home, only 76.4% indicated the same requirement for restaurants, suggesting that communal norms on having a home that others could eat in was more important than the personal observance of the restrictions." Setting aside whether or not those percentages are even accurate, here we find a discussion about observance that takes places entirely in the realm of the researcher's analyses. There's no place in the survey that allows respondents to define a set of standards by which they measure "observance."

It seems to me that he completely missed the point. Both halakhically and sociologically, *kashrut* (outside of Israel) is defined primarily by two factors—the nature of the products being consumed and the separation between meat and milk. In contemporary Orthodoxy, levels of *kashrut* are defined by the extent to which one is careful in these two areas. Discrepancy between the observance of these rules in two different realms demands an explanation, and the explanation offered emerges from both the evidence provided and insider knowledge of the community and its practices.

Another critique leveled by Williams relates to the language used. For example, he does not like the term "off the *derekh*" or OTD, and suggests that

> the language used in the surveys themselves (e.g., OTD or "Off the *Derekh*," to refer to those who "leave" Orthodoxy) can alienate potential respondents (e.g., many who leave Orthodoxy prefer the term ex-O). In addition to the political and social repercussions—it is a difficult

> thing to do to an otherwise already marginalized community—alienating respondents also narrows the population that surveys can potentially draw from to help craft a more comprehensive image.

Williams could not be more wrong, and he would have realized that had he read the report more carefully. I used the term once in the report to describe a phenomena as described by others. That language, or any implication of it, did not appear anywhere in the survey instrument itself. There is no way that any respondent could have been alienated by a term that was not used or even implied.

There are other areas in which Williams would not have erred had he have read the survey carefully. For example, the report's first page explicitly states that:

> This survey was undertaken as a private research project by the author after 35 years of work in and for day schools. It was not sponsored by any granting organization and not influenced by any agenda other than my own desire to find out where the graduates of Yeshiva high schools are.

Despite this, multiple times in his critique he identifies the survey as one conducted by The Lookstein Center. Although I do work for The Lookstein Center in a completely different capacity, it played no role in this project and bears no responsibility for creating or administering the survey instrument, nor for the content or flaws in the analyses and the report.

And here is the rub. While Williams may be right to call for greater statistical rigor in studies of the Jewish community, it is he who may be drawing conclusions based on something other than the evidence. Someone committed to ensuring that we are learning the right things about the Jewish community based on careful work should take greater care in charging that "the Jewish community, as evidenced by these and many other studies, does not really seem to care about alienating respondents because it does not care about getting it right."

I would be more careful about drawing spurious conclusions from scant evidence.

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Everything You Wanted to Know About Surveying the Orthodox Community—And Why the Recent Research Is Important

Mark Trencher

Important new research is being done in the Orthodox community. Issues of substantial concern—which have been largely overlooked by the larger, oft-cited Jewish community surveys—are being explored, and the community is beginning to develop information that will be helpful in making informed decisions.

While the research approaches being taken are not perfect, it would be a shame to allow naysayers to deflect from the value and experience being obtained. Most recently, Matthew Williams made some valid points, but his article reflected a lack of appreciation of how and why previous research has not met the Orthodox community's needs, and some of his statements were incorrect.

Full Disclosure: I am the principal analyst and author of "The Nishma Research Profile of American Modern Orthodox Jews" (September, 2017), and my comments will largely relate to that study. Williams also cited the more recent "Survey of Yeshiva High School Graduates" (January, 2018), conducted by Zvi Grumet of the Lookstein Center.

Why this Research has been Long Overdue

There have been only scattered efforts to conduct quality research into the issues most relevant to Orthodoxy. As a result, institutions in the Orthodox community often make decisions without access to any research, or they may rely on poorly done research; alternatively, they may explore sources like Pew Research Center's 2013 study of American Jews, although it reached only 154 Modern Orthodox respondents.

Williams took issue with the Nishma survey's stated 95% accuracy range of ±1.7%, noting that the sample was not representative enough to warrant this figure (I will address the representativeness of the Nishma survey sample below). However, the Pew Survey 95% accuracy range for its Modern Orthodoxy sample is in fact much wider, at ±8%. That small sample of Modern Orthodox is more problematic if one wants to look at such differences as men vs. women, by age, or by group within Modern Orthodoxy. The sample is too small to allow for much slicing in this manner, with the result that few differences will be statistically meaningful.

Covering the Relevant Issues

Jewish communal surveys typically cover many issues aimed at the broad spectrum of Jews, including Conservative, Reform, etc., and devote only a small part of the survey to the issues, attitudes, and concerns that are particularly—and often uniquely—relevant to Modern Orthodoxy.

For example, Nishma found the #1 concern among Modern Orthodox Jews was the high cost of Jewish education. This was explored in neither Pew nor the other major study of recent years, the UJA Federation's "Jewish Community Study of NY 2011" (JCS). The #2 issue that concerned Modern Orthodox Jews was the plight of *agunot* ("chained women" unable to remarry because they have not received a *gett*, a religious divorce); again, an issue that was a "no show" in the communal studies. The #3 issue of concern was religious people not dealing with others with appropriate *middot* (proper behaviors), followed at #4 by the cost of maintaining an Orthodox home. Of the 27 areas of possible concern listed in the survey, 16 were specific to the Orthodox world.

In general, the issues of concern to Orthodoxy are not covered or, at best, glossed over in the major communal studies. Additionally, those studies treat Modern Orthodoxy as a homogeneous group. This is far from true, as Modern Orthodoxy covers a wide span from Open Orthodox, through liberal and centrist groups, to some that tend toward more *yeshivish* attitudes and behaviors. The Nishma survey explored these subgroups and found very large differences in beliefs, practices, and attitudes across Modern Orthodoxy. We aimed for a large sample in order to enable exploration of the differences across Modern Orthodoxy with high statistical validity.

Surveys like Pew and JCS give us an understanding of such issues as how often Jews visit their Jewish Community Center, send their children to a Jewish day camp, and whether their household had a Christmas tree last year. These are important issues in understanding American Jews and their connection to the Jewish community and practices, but they do not resonate with or inform the Orthodox community (which makes up 11% of American Jewry) or the Modern Orthodox (which comprises 4%) in any meaningful way.

These small percentages may explain why the communal surveys devote little attention to the issues that are specific to Orthodoxy. Unfortunately, we have fallen by the wayside in the research world; however the recent surveys are steps toward ameliorating that oversight.

Making Lemonade Out of Lemons

The Nishma survey questionnaire was developed by an advisory group of academics, sociologists with expertise in the Jewish community, Modern Orthodox rabbis, lay leaders, and educators. This was done to ensure that the survey addressed the issues facing Orthodoxy, most of which had not been explored in any organized study of the community.

The survey reached 3,903 American Modern Orthodox Jews, a strong response that reflects the community's interest in being heard, and that allows for deeper analysis of differences among groups.

How was this done? And is the sample representative and reliable? Simply put, were we able to make lemonade out of lemons?

There is no "list" of Modern Orthodox Jews available to researchers. Pew notes that the "low incidence (of Jews in the population) means that building a probability sample of U.S. Jews is difficult and costly." What Pew did was to: (1) draw upon prior survey results to identify about 1,700 U.S. counties that have at least 0.25% Jewish population; (2) make 71,151 phone calls to screen people as to their being Jewish; and (3) ask those identified to take the telephone survey. In the end, 3,475 people took the survey, including 154 Modern Orthodox.

Williams was appropriately critical of internet-based opt-in surveys that rely on social media. He seemed to imply that the Nishma survey used social media; it did not. Reaching out to people by calling or otherwise contacting them (an approach that researchers describe as "opt-out") is the much-preferred way to conduct a sociological study. Alternatively, a study released through social media—for example, by posting links to an online survey at Facebook pages—is known as "opt-in" and has been shown to generate more biased (i.e., less representative) samples.

But there is a reality … based on the Pew experience, we would have had to make 925,000 phone calls to obtain the desired 2,000 Modern Orthodox respondents that would provide for meaningful analysis of the subgroups. That was clearly not doable.

To reach our target audience, we drew upon the virtual universality of synagogue attendance and/or affiliation among Orthodox Jews. Phase 1 was to carefully select 30 Modern Orthodox synagogues across the US, across geographic, denominational, and size categories, which agreed to send the survey to their members. Phase 2 was the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) reaching out to its hundreds of Modern Orthodox rabbis, many of whom, in turn, invited their synagogue members to participate in the survey.

The language that synagogue members received in an email invitation simply noted in neutral language that this survey was going to be taking place, mentioned some of the topics, and encouraged them to participate by clicking on a provided link. Nishma did not solicit responses via social media because we wanted to avoid skewing the sample by disproportionately drawing upon those with pet issues or complaints.

Admittedly, this was an opt-in survey. We follow the guidance of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) to the effect that opt-in surveys are not ideal. However, given the small size of the Orthodox (0.25% of the US population) and Modern Orthodox (0.1% of the US population), the lack of any lists that can be used to create an opt-out mechanism, and the huge cost of methods such as those used by Pew, a well-designed opt-in survey was judged to be the most viable option. We are transparent in sharing our methodology because we believe it was the best possible approach at this stage in the development of Orthodox world research.

One more observation: The findings have been shared in presentations and weekend programs at a number of shuls, and people's reactions are that the findings ring true. They may like or dislike what they hear (and there is often a vibrant discussion), but I have not yet heard anyone say that the findings seem inconsistent with what he or she has observed in the community.

Some Corrections

A few of Williams' comments warrant correction:

1. He wrote: "The studies assume a constellation of 'core' values but this does not allow for space or opportunity for participants to offer their own definitions of behaviors and beliefs. As a result, both surveys provide less data about the sampled population." We believe strongly in the value of open-ended questions, and The Nishma Research study provided respondents with the opportunity to comment at great length regarding their beliefs and practices. We have several lengthy documents available online, including an 84-page document in which people go into great detail on their beliefs as well as aspects of Orthodoxy that give them satisfaction and those that cause unhappiness. I strongly recommend that people read this thought-provoking document.

2. Williams criticized some of the language, citing as an example the use of terms like "OTD" or "Off the *Derekh*." Our survey did not include this term (nor did we use it in our 2016 Survey of Those Who Have Left Orthodoxy). He also cautioned against the "alienation of potential respondents" and "rhetorical flavor." I agree; our language was carefully vetted, in the survey questionnaire as well as the reporting.

Don't Let "Perfect" Get in the Way of "Good"

Clearly, opt-out surveys are superior to opt-in surveys and should always be the goal. However, there are situations where we need to be creative and do the best we can, drawing upon available resources while taking steps to maximize sample representativeness and minimize bias. This is especially challenging when dealing with a statistically minute population.

Nishma means "listen" and I encourage people to read the report. Its goal was to get people thinking about these issues and it is doing so. Read through these new reports, continue to question, seek to understand, and get productive dialogue going within the community.

Don't let "perfect" get in the way of "good." Let us built on what we are learning.

Finally, the time has come for the Orthodox community to find the resources to do high quality research. It should be a communal imperative, and not just a labor of love by a few dedicated researchers.

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Editors' Introduction: The past year has been full of conversations, statements, and publications surrounding the topic of women's roles in Orthodox Judaism. Among the many issues underlying this important and continued dialogue is how women experience their religious lives, and what will enable them to foster and sustain a relationship with God. The Lehrhaus therefore presents this three-part symposium. We thank Tova Warburg Sinensky for spearheading and serving as guest editor for this project.

A Spirited Quest

Giti Bendheim

I grew up in a home where my parents took education very seriously. They had a passion, from the time I was very young, for the then nascent day school movement, and for the newly established State of Israel. My day school taught all Jewish subjects *Ivrit b-Ivrit*, and the enthusiasm and passion of my mostly Israeli teachers engendered in me an early love for Jewish studies and Hebrew. I cherish the many passages we had to learn by heart to this day.

But as I grew older, the dearly-held value of education expressed itself in an ironic way, especially for me, as the oldest child. It was a foregone conclusion that my two younger brothers would go away to yeshiva—since a coed high school would not serve the religiously aspirational goals of my parents for their sons. It was not considered a deficit that the *yeshivot* my parents had in mind did not embrace the Modern Orthodox lifestyle that my family led. In fact, in those days, when Modern Orthodoxy was perhaps less self-confident about its bona fides, the "black hat" culture that my brothers would become a part of was looked upon in our out-of-town community with veneration. If you really studied hard, and really learned the sources, then this was the authentic way that you would lead your Jewish life.

There was, therefore, no question in anyone's mind—least of all in mine—that those little guys would go away to a serious place of learning for high school—and I would not, because I was a girl. The comment by a visiting *rosh yeshiva* after I simply answered a question in our seventh grade Talmud class, that it was too bad that I wasn't a boy, sums up the situation succinctly. Clear gender norms and expectations precluded any serious thought about how my spiritual inclinations would or would not be addressed during my adolescence.

Which left me at home, knowing that my search for meaning would have to wait until college. I resolved that when I got to college, I would find a way to explore my Judaism as rigorously as I was pursuing the rest of my education. I just didn't quite know how that was going to happen. During my sophomore year, a cousin told me about a new three-year school that had just started in Israel that was taking Torah study to a new level for women. I immediately filled up every available crevice of a pale blue aerogram with my plea—in cramped Hebrew script—for the dean of the school to accept me for one year. I knew my chances were slim, but fortune smiled upon me, and I was accepted. I consider myself to be forever indebted to Rabbi Yehuda Copperman, *zt"l*, for the extraordinary opportunity he

thus gave me to absorb his inspired and incisive—and revolutionary for its time—approach to Torah study.

The year that I spent in Michlalah Yerushalayim was deeply transformative. I immersed myself completely in a culture profoundly different in every way from my American Modern Orthodox college life. I lived in a crowded apartment with eight other young women, and spent all day in a repurposed shul learning in Hebrew. My teachers were gifted, many of them rising to become the leading educators of their day. The students—most of whom were Israeli— all seemed to know fifty times more than I did. I spent my evenings in the library poring over *Bereishit Rabbah* and *Maharal.* Every day I ate a Krembo purchased from the kiosk across the street for lunch. No food plan, no guys, no street life. Nothing. But as I walked home in the cold, clear night air on the dusty main road of Bayit VeGan, the vast starry sky above me sparkled with possibility, winking knowingly of all I could grow to know.

I remember my transformative moment—a moment when my studying moved from concrete information-gathering to active theory-making. In preparation for an assigned paper, I was studying the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud that guided the Israelites through the desert. I labored over Rashi, tried to grasp his questions, studied his commentators, read the *midrashim.* Slowly, to my surprise, I found myself beginning to form my own theory— that what was provided for the Jews was a mini-cosmos—a portable little world. I reasoned that it had its own versions of sunrise and sunset, it totally enveloped its inhabitants, it fed them manna, and it insulated them from the exigencies of the desert.

This was thrilling. I had jumped from the concrete to the abstract, arriving at an interesting and evocative idea that captured a new way of thinking about the desert journey with which I was already so familiar. The idea that the text was mine to access, that I could be creative with it, and that I could arrive at ever-deeper levels of understanding by carefully mining the text on my own was tremendously exciting and empowering. I could meet the commentators on common ground, and live the text along with them.

I suppose that, like the Israelites in the desert, I inhabited my own protective cocoon during that formative year. I often wonder why I didn't miss the *sturm und drang* of the late sixties that was in full force on my New York campus, but it could not have been further away. Israel was in its post-1967 state of nirvana, joy was intense, spirituality at an all-time high. Rudimentary plumbing, long distance calls made with *asimonim* from the central post office, visits to relatives who hadn't seen my family in a generation—these were the experiences that limned my life. The peaceful vista of *Harei Yehuda* dotted with bright red *kalaniot* just across the road—behind the military cemetery—was all I needed to engender in me a profound sense of beauty and rightness. I was in love with this land, with its language, with its spiritual passion, with its Torah, with the almost primitive and sparse simplicity of a life so different from the complexities I had left at home.

And then it was over. I came back to Vietnam protests, Simon and Garfunkel, the New Criticism, the excitement of engagement and marriage, and nothing to adequately stoke the fires of learning I carried within me. Until Rabbi David Silber founded Drisha. Now, Michlalah and Drisha sound like they are very far apart in both learning style and philosophy—and so they are. It might thus come as a surprise that I actually brought Rabbi Copperman up the several flights of stairs in Drisha's first home to sit in on a shiur with its founder, Rabbi David Silber. Such was my enthusiasm for this new institution that was founded on the premise that women deserved a rigorous advanced Torah education.

This commitment was what Rabbi Copperman and Rabbi Silber had in common, though their paths to making this education a reality diverged increasingly as time went on. But for me, brilliance was brilliance, and I guess it was the intellectual electricity and the spiritual gravitas that inspired me—rather than a particular educational or religious nuance. I loved the creativity of David Silber's way of learning, and the range and depth of his textual knowledge of *Tanakh*. Drisha became my new learning home, a haven of Torah scholarship deeply embedded in the lively realm of child-raising and professional training in which I lived.

To this day, learning Torah—alone or in a *haburah*— continues to be a spiritual practice that engages my mind and expresses my soul. I love its allusiveness, the way root words point to deep connections, the way themes develop and play out, the many ways one can make meaning out of a seemingly straightforward series of ancient words that carry a whiff of the divine. This learning also connects me to Israel—thematically, personally, and practically—as I feel Israel's centrality to the *Tanakh* at the core of my own Jewish identity.

I have embraced the world of Torah study in Israel that has opened up for women by women, beginning with the founding of Matan by my fellow Michlalah-mate, Rabbanit Malke Bina, and continuing to the founding of Nishmat by Rabbanit Chana Henkin, and those—both in Israel and America—who have followed in their pioneering footsteps. I have a very keen sense of participation in these advances, and find them crucial to my own religious development. I also prize them for the opportunities and role models they have provided for my daughters, daughters-in law, and granddaughters.

As Orthodox feminism has taken root, I have found myself an active advocate, often struggling to square my need for religious and intellectual rigor with its progressive edge. I'm committed to the many strengths and contributions women bring to the communal table, and I believe they fill tremendous gaps in our religious system. There are biblical concepts I struggle with, and I don't know what to do about the *agunah* problem. I look to our rabbis and scholars to help me find a way, but am often disappointed that a woman's existential position is not being dealt with seriously enough by a conservative system that naturally wants to maintain the status quo. I worry about an unenlightened fundamentalism borne, perhaps, of Holocaust trauma that prizes rigidity and close-mindedness over honesty and courage.

On the other hand, I worry, too, about sloppy scholarship, about political and social motivations that draw too much upon secular cultural values. But I have come to understand that as the world keeps on turning, so, too, must *halakhah*. Attitudes, mores, and ways of thinking truly change, and thus the context within which *halakhah* operates changes, as well.

When the leaders and institutions I have trusted fail to rise to this challenge, I feel at a loss, left to choose between surrendering to what I believe to be insufficiently exercised leadership or challenging that authority and being labeled controversial. I have chosen to make myself part of a larger tent, hoping that my voice can be heard both within it—to promote a shared and solidly-grounded religious sensibility—and without, to demand recognition and a sense of gravitas. I relish the spiritual sustenance I receive from making common cause with these women who want to live their lives in a coherent way that places their Judaism front and center.

I am aware that I haven't said much about the study of Talmud, which has the highest power valence in the learning world. I had only that one year of Talmud in seventh grade, and even Michlalah did not offer it, at least not in my day. My natural proclivity is for literature and narrative, so, for me, *Tanakh* is a natural fit. I don't experience this as a default, but rather as something I would have chosen, though I believe a full education for women today must include a thorough grounding in Talmud. I know that women will not have an impact on our religious hierarchy unless and until they become completely proficient in Talmud, which takes the issue of learning out of the halls of the *beit midrash*, where it is still viewed as a matter of choice for women, and into the corridors of power, where it is a given.

And so we arrive at the topic of power. I am fortunate to be in a position to help support institutions that stand for the values I would like to promote, and when I think of what moves me spiritually, I think about the experience of exercising meaningful philanthropy. There is something extremely empowering about the privilege of being able to help move something good from dream to reality, all the more so when that dream holds the promise of making a place for richer, fuller, and more meaningful engagement with Judaism for more people. I believe that women have shied away from owning and using this tool to promote their own interests, and have perhaps underestimated the benefits of collaborating on a shared goal.

I have come to recognize that women need to back up their aspirational goals with their own resources to have the greatest impact. My model for this realization was Belda Lindenbaum, *z'l*, who stood behind the initiatives she believed in with character, grit, leadership, and financial resources. As I watched her demonstrate these qualities from afar, I gained strength and courage from her example, and hope that perhaps I can pay that forward through my own personal work, and through working creatively with others to advocate for causes I hold dear.

I look at the arc of the development of women's learning over the past forty years, and am struck by how much has changed. Both single-sex and coed elementary schools and high schools are offering serious and creative Jewish educations to their female students. The "year in Israel" is now the all-important "gap year." There are many programs to choose from, each trying to cater to a specific kind of young woman, and each one offering a slightly different Israeli, religious, social, and cultural experience. There are pastoral training programs for women, and advanced women's learning programs of many stripes.

I salute this practical, goal-oriented, professionally-driven progress. But I find myself wanting to preserve, as well, something more unpredictable and exciting, especially for young women in the process of establishing their own religious identities. I'm hoping that somewhere there is still a place for the "aha" moment that I felt as a young woman, when I ventured forth into an unknown territory, and where so many elements of my Jewish experience came together—somewhat unexpectedly—with a satisfying click.

I think that sustaining that liminal space requires two kinds of effort. In the face of today's rampant irony and ennui, I think our first order of business is to apply ourselves—with concentrated focus—to the wisdom and scholarship that has come before us. We need to continue learning seriously and deeply.

But sustaining that space as a place for discovery and growth requires investing our learning experiences with novelty and creativity—with something that illuminates a new corner of the world, ignites a girl's imagination, kindles a teen's curiosity, or sparks a woman's faith. I can think of no better or more restorative mandate for our present fractured state of being than to work consciously to approach Torah study with reverence, to imbue it with freshness, relevance, and immediacy, and to frame it as the beautiful, exhilarating, and enlivening path to *avodat Hashem* I believe it was meant to be.

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The Messages We Are Sending

Tamar Snyder Chaitovsky

The messages my Modern Orthodox community has been sending me—as a woman in my thirties, a wife, and mother of three kids under the age of eight—have been disappointing, to say the least.

We—mothers of young children, many of whom work full-time outside the home—are encouraged to cook multi-course *Shabbat* and holiday meals for new parents and those who are ill, and host large meals for new families who recently joined the community. We're also expected to actively volunteer time and donate money to our shuls and day schools. These are valuable *hesed* opportunities, but they fall largely on us women. (When was the last time a man signed up to prepare baby meals?)

And what about our spiritual lives? Davening even once a day? Attending shul on *Shabbat* (and not just showing up for the *kiddush* at the end)? Participating in *shiurim* on a regular basis or having a weekly *havruta*? The message I hear is that such activities are just not important during this stage of life; we'll have the opportunity to attend plenty of *shiurim* when the children are older. Doing so now is nice, of course—no one would challenge that—but such spiritual engagement is considered a luxury.

The problem is that without engaging in the spiritual—the learning, the *davening*, communicating with Hashem and developing a close relationship with Him—all of these other things (the *hesed*, the cooking, the Sisterhood board meetings) begin to feel like a drag. They're divorced from meaning. Another demand on top of an already overflowing schedule.

And if you're anything like me, you might find yourself waking up one morning after years of nursing, pumping, and middle-of-the-night wakings, teething, and bed-wetting, and realizing that Hashem and I—we aren't really on speaking terms. I'm not angry at Hashem. (How could I be? He's blessed me with so much goodness!) But He just doesn't factor into my life in as meaningful a way as He used to.

After all, we don't talk much.

A decade (or longer!) is a long time to spend bereft of spirituality. As I begin to contemplate the next stage—a future in which I will no longer be bogged down by strollers and sippy cups and diapers and bibs—I think about all I have lost during this time, from a spiritual perspective. The spiritual person I was in seminary or as a newlywed? I hardly recognize her.

There are ways in which our community can do better to encourage—and support—mothers of young children in their desire for continued personal and spiritual growth while also nourishing their young and growing families.

For now, I've had to struggle to discover my own solutions, and find myself frustrated by the lack of communal support.

Since my youngest daughter turned a year old, I have been actively working to pick up the pieces of my shattered spirituality.

It isn't easy. I daven most mornings, but there are times I realize as I plop into bed after a dizzyingly busy day that it just didn't happen. I downloaded Torah podcasts to listen to during my commute in place of my go-to podcasts—but, I admit, they haven't captured my attention in the same way. I try to attend *shiurim*, but after a full day of work and then the frenzied dinner-bath-book-bed routine, I'm simply too exhausted to leave the house.

My husband—who is an equal partner and does the majority of the daycare drop-offs and pick-ups and grocery shopping—has been very supportive. Together, we have come up with our own solutions, often at a significant financial (and emotional) cost.

For example, I added up the cost of childcare for our one-year-old so both my husband and I could daven in shul on *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*. It was $400 (above the cost of seats and *yom tov* meals and other *hag*-related costs). That's a significant sum for many of us. Next year, my husband might attend the early morning minyan, but that would mean stepping down from davening for the *amud* at one of the later *minyanim.* As it is, everyone else gets to hear my husband's beautiful davening except for me.

On *Shabbat*, my husband attends the *hashkamah* minyan. While he's there, I get all three kids fed and dressed. He brings our one-year-old to a weekly *haburah* (if she behaves), or they hang out in the baby room while I daven upstairs in the main *minyan* (the other two attend youth groups).

This schedule makes it possible for me to daven, but it also means I can never get to shul on time—leaving me feeling that my prayer is devalued as compared to my husband's, at least on a communal level. The issues—that groups start too late and are only for children ages three and older—aren't ones we can resolve on our own beyond hiring a nanny every *Shabbat*, which is not a budget-friendly solution.

Communities and organizations, like people, send messages—oftentimes subconsciously—through their actions and more significantly, inactions. So even if community leaders say that they value something, examining how budgets are spent and which actions are taken are more telling in

understanding their true priorities. If our *shuls* were really concerned with the spiritual growth of parents of young children, these are but some of the changes they can implement:

Prayer

- Youth groups would begin at the same time as the main *minyan* begins—no longer would shul start at 8:45 a.m. while groups for children don't begin until 9:30 a.m. (I have no idea how single parents of young children manage. What messages are we sending them?)
- Youth groups (led by qualified caregivers) would be offered for children of all ages, not only those who are three and older (and potty trained). Don't moms (and dads?) of children under three deserve the opportunity to *daven b'-zibur* if they so choose?
- At the very least, on *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, the holiest days of the year, shuls can provide additional childcare. For many of us, spending the holiest day of the year building towers out of MagnaTiles with our children does not leave us feeling fulfilled. At least one shul in Teaneck offers babysitting for infants during *Shofar* blowing and *Mussaf*—I'd like to see this become the norm.

Torah Study

- When *shiurim* are offered, complimentary childcare should be offered (and advertised!), as well. I started sponsoring *shiurim* at my shul with the express request that my funds be used to cover accompanying babysitting (and making sure they hire capable caregivers with whom I feel comfortable leaving my toddler).
- As a community, let's invest in creating resources for parents of young children—perhaps webinars or podcasts that can be listened to on one's own schedule, without having to book a babysitter. Another trend that I would like to see more of is the livestreaming of all *shiurim*, as well as recording them for later use. Some shuls are already experimenting with this, but could finesse the technical aspects. Other ideas may include Facebook groups and other non-traditional media aimed at helping parents of young children tap into Torah learning in a genuine way, on their own schedule.

Community

- When a *shul* organizes an event, community dinner, or speaker series, think about whether young parents can participate fully, and if not, what might be done to make it so they too can attend. It's not always possible, of course—but even putting yourself in a young family's shoes can help engender goodwill and inclusivity.
- It behooves the Orthodox community to invest more, not less, in women's leadership. Having women in leadership roles will not only ensure that the perspective of mothers of young children is taken into account, but these female leaders will also serve as the role models women like myself are searching for and would surely benefit from.

My local rabbi and other synagogue leaders don't necessarily disagree with me. However, childcare is expensive. Worse, they tell me that I'm the lone voice raising these issues—they don't get these requests from other women. Implicit in this response is that there is something wrong with my desire to attend *shul* on *Shabbat*, to participate in a *shiur*. (Is it so wrong to look to my *shul* as a place to help me reconnect with Hashem and nourish my soul?)

But I am confident that I am not alone. My friends tell me that they, too, feel that they don't have a place in the synagogue, that it isn't the spiritual refuge they seek. But they don't approach the Rabbi because they've given up. This is the way things are. They're more accepting of the status quo than I am. So what if they don't *daven* on a regular basis anymore? Does it matter? The message we are getting is that it doesn't.

Much has been written about surviving the physical difficulties that come along with the blessing of raising small children—the sleepless nights, the terrible twos and more terrible threes, potty training, and the like. But the spiritual challenges that many parents of young children face often go unacknowledged or are minimized. Mothers of young children, in particular, can spend a decade or more in what Adina Kastner termed "structureless spirituality."

Our community can—and must—do more to support women's spiritual growth and connectedness—especially when their children are still in diapers. I fear that if changes aren't made, women will no longer see the synagogue as a place of spiritual sustenance. Who's to say that the young mom who never makes it to *shul* will start attending frequently when her children do, eventually, grow up?

She will likely find other avenues for personal growth, or worse yet, view the *shul* as a place that satisfies the needs of every member of her family except her own. This will come at a cost, not only to her personally, and to her family, but to the community at large, as well.

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Supporting Women's *Avodat Hashem* Across the Lifespan: Reflections and Recommendations

Tova Warburg Sinensky

"Lost in Structureless Spirituality."

This eloquent formulation is both the title of Adina Kastner's article and an apt description of her feelings, and those of many women. She refers to her involvement in communal *tefillah* and *Talmud Torah bi-havruta* during middle school and high school as "structured spirituality," through which she feels "I also had my closest relationship with God." But that relationship has changed. "I have never felt further from Hashem than I do right now. My break from davening and learning because of my busy life as a working mother has hurt my relationship with God."

While the proliferation of serious learning opportunities for women has profoundly enriched and enhanced the spiritual lives of thousands worldwide by engaging women's minds in *Avodat Hashem*, it is accompanied by its own difficulties.

Women for whom intensive *Talmud Torah* is, or was, a prime access point to *Hashem* face a serious challenge.[1] What happens when one's time is not her own, and life becomes busy with family and work? If she has cultivated her religious identity and spiritual life through religious structures, how is she to feel anchored and remain committed and connected in a new state of "structureless spirituality?"

A fish does not survive for long out of water. Women are thirsting for ways to be and feel religiously connected, and our communities are not adequately quenching the thirst. While much ink has been spilled bemoaning the difficulties, the response often seems like an amalgam of spiritual band aids, not solutions that address the core issues. Drawing on my personal experiences as well as sentiments I have heard in my work as an educator and *Yoetzet Halacha*, I suggest four ways we can shift the paradigm regarding how we understand the obstacles women face, in order to facilitate sustained and vibrant *Avodat Hashem* across the female lifespan.

***Avodat Hashem* is Equally Important for Men and Women**

This conversation can only take place if we all, men and women alike, truly believe that every human being is required and entitled to live lives of meaningful engagement with God.

In a 2014 article published in the *YU Observer*, Hannah Dreyfus writes:

> I want to talk about expectations. Or rather, how low expectations affect our religious lives. In the Orthodox community, Jewish women are not expected to wake up at 8am every morning and strap phylacteries on their foreheads ... to attend prayer services three times a day … and

[1] It would be worthwhile to examine the male experience as well, which is parallel in many ways. However, I write this piece drawing on my personal experience as a woman and those of my peers. The female challenge has unique elements, particularly given that women often find themselves in the role of caretaker, and do not have the same halakhic obligations as men in *Talmud Torah* and *Tefillah b-tzibbur*.

dedicate a couple minutes to Torah-study every day. Within our community, much less is expected of women with regards to communal and religious obligations than of men.

Details aside, the author exposes a misconception that wreaks havoc with the spiritual lives and aspirations of women, young and old. The exemption of women from a number of time-bound positive *mitzvot*, many of which are "structured" and require the presence of women in communal spaces, is sometimes interpreted to mean that God expects less of women than of men**.** Too often, women mistakenly believe that God does not ask of them to invest time and energy to achieve rich spiritual lives.

I wonder if women's *Avodat Hashem* has not been a top priority on our communal agenda because we as a community mistakenly believe this, as well.

Every human being, regardless of gender, has the obligation and potential to have a real, deep, and meaningful relationship with God. As Rambam writes in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* (4:13) on the attainment of ultimate knowledge of God, it is "accessible to all, little and great, men and women." We must understand and communicate that technical obligation in degree or type of a certain *mitzvah* is not *sine qua non* for God's high expectations; many roads can lead to the same place.

From a young age, let's talk to females, especially, about striving for excellence not just in academics, but in all aspects of *Avodat Hashem*. Let's help our daughters explore and discuss different ways to serve God. Let's continually reflect on where we are, where we would like to be, and how we can get there. Not just around *Rosh Hashanah* time, but year-round. Finally, let's celebrate those achievements.

Let's communicate that women can and must be ambitious regarding their religious lives, and set the bar high.

Communicating the Spiritual "Facts of Life"

Frustration emerges from the gap between reality and expectations. If we aspire for our students and children to have a lifelong connection with God that includes structured spiritual activities, it behooves us to be transparent about the realities of engagement in these activities over the lifespan. We must do a better job at communicating that the "*Beit Midrash* life" does not last forever and prepare our young women for that reality.

Verbally acknowledging to our students and children that like any relationship, a deep bond with God is dynamic and can take on different forms at different times, is key to the development of a healthy understanding of spirituality. At the same time as we continue to encourage women to reach great spiritual heights through structured spiritual pursuits, it is critical that we articulate and normalize inevitable shifts in how one connects to God, and discuss the experience of navigating those changes.

Questions that we can ask to proactively address the spiritual "facts of life" include: Do I (teacher, parent, role model) personally have the opportunity to learn Torah every day, as I suggest others do? When is the last time I davened with a *minyan*, or davened all of *Shaharit* from start to finish (as I encourage my children to sit in *shul* for the entirety of *Yamim Noraim tefillah*)?

How is it *postpartum* to garner all my strength to learn, only for the baby to cry minutes later? What does it feel like to have a newborn and forget to say *minhah*? And, what is it like to feel okay about missing that *minhah*? To feel content with sitting in a rocking chair every two hours, for an hour, nursing? Is it valid to feel satisfied with a spiritual existence that feels different than it may have in the past?

These conversations need to take place with our men and boys too; we must also help them understand the female spiritual experience. Some men will be on the boards of institutions who make decisions that affect female members or will be spiritual leaders themselves; all of them can be the supporters and advocates of their wives and daughters as they navigate different phases of life.

As uncomfortable as it can feel to make oneself vulnerable, the benefits of being transparent about the reality of our spiritual lives outweigh the costs.

Providing the Full Toolbox

Our community seems to downplay the importance of *mitzvot* that are more "unstructured" forms of *Avodat Hashem*. This exacerbates women's feelings of disconnect, ungroundedness, and disenchantment at life stages when connecting to God through *tefillah* and *Talmud Torah* is less accessible because they feel that they are left with no genuine avenues of religious engagement

In a provocative article, Noah Greenfield analyzes our hagiography of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. He writes:

> The legends of the Rav paint a man who was a genius, a brilliant proponent of Brisk, a passionate though tough educator, an excellent philosopher, a stirring speaker; an austere, rigorously pious, intensely devoted, intellectual - but not a *tsaddik* … The image of any religious leader … is developed largely by the community that reveres him … In the Modern Orthodox community, I do not think we value the *tsaddik*.

Greenfield astutely notes that we devalue other *mitzvot* as compared to *tefillah* and *Talmud Torah*, broadcasting the unspoken message that other forms of *Avodat Hashem* are not valid forms of spirituality. Granted, Modern Orthodox institutions spearhead *hesed* initiatives, have *hesed* committees, awards, and *middot* programs. Camps and programs for adults and youth with special needs and unique backgrounds abound, and it seems that everyone has run a race to raise money for an important cause. The list goes on.

Yet, I wonder if we truly believe that there are many ways to serve God.

The message that *Talmud Torah* is the ultimate goal, and that other spiritual pursuits are subpar is implicit in the structure of our day school classes, with the "*Beit Midrash* Track" presented as the pride and joy of many schools; it is embedded in the communications from day schools touting which *Yeshivot* and *Midrashot* their students attend, and how many of their students won the YU High School *Bekiut* Program award; it is in our Facebook feeds, with community institutions trying to "one-up" each other by bringing in the best and brightest scholars.

For many of us, performance of other *mitzvot* may not naturally result in the same feelings of connection with God as learning *night seder* and *davening* at the 10 PM *Maariv* that follows. But perhaps they could and should. We may mock others who share that making *kugels* or playing with Magnatiles is part of their *Avodat Hashem*.

We may write them off as "the other." However, if we take an honest look at the texts that underscore the importance of raising families and its primacy in the arena of *Avodat Hashem*, perhaps we will find that our responses function as a cover for our own feelings of inadequacy that *we* struggle to view and experience these activities through the prism of religious observance.

Our mindset must shift, as must the conversations that take place in our homes and communities. Let's start by saying the words *Avodat Hashem* and discuss what the phrase "relationship with God" means. Instead of asking, "How many *pesukim* did you learn?" and "What number *siyum* is this?" let's inquire, "What did you do to serve God today?" Let's have conversations about the *mitzvot* that we have found to infuse us with religious passion and meaning. And if we are not finding that we are feeling connected, let's together unpack why that is and discuss how we can change it.

Creating Communal Infrastructures for Women, by Women

Even as we educate about the realities of a relationship with God and broaden the definition of *Avodat Hashem*, it is critical to provide structured spiritual opportunities that are predicated on an understanding of *the unique needs of our female population*. As women best understand this, it is time for communities to empower females to be at the forefront of these conversations, and to be leaders in creating the infrastructures that will support their spiritual engagement.

"Town hall" meetings could be convened in *shuls* for women to share their needs and requests with male and female *shul* leadership. Spiritual growth committees, for men and women, respectively—an explicit acknowledgement of the different needs of each population—can take shape in order to solicit input and create the appropriate infrastructure. A network of such committees could be created so that institutions can share ideas and best practices with one another.

Women sharing their experiences and hearing from one another is important in itself. Opportunities to hear from women who are already beyond some of the most trying phases can be created. Live and

online forums can be facilitated by women so that those in similar stages can share ideas, and provide support and inspiration. It is time for our community to elicit information about its member's spiritual needs and address challenges proactively.

There is much discourse surrounding the importance of female role models, often understood to mean women with training and background teaching *Torah* or spiritually advising other women. To most effectively address the core educational issues delineated above, I suggest we think more broadly about this concept.

By virtue of being committed religious women, we are all potential role models, regardless of background in Jewish texts, irrespective of profession. As women, we most intimately understand what engaging in a relationship with God across the female lifespan entails. We are the ones who can, from our unique perch, utter the words in Tehillim 42:3, "My soul thirsts for God, the living God; O when will I come to appear before God."

Let's share our experiences,challenges and successes so that every member of our community can help mold the female spiritual landscape by communicating the spiritual facts of life, broadening the toolbox of *Avodat Hashem*, supporting structured spiritual opportunities that meet the needs of women, and most fundamentally, believing and expressing that we are all meant to have rich spiritual lives.

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Why I Don't Miss Shul on Yom Kippur

Leslie Ginsparg Klein

Editors' Note: This essay was originally published in our site on September 28, 2017. We are re-publishing it once again, given its relevance to the other essays published in this week's symposium.

When I was single, I stayed with my brother and sister-in-law for Yom Kippur every year. They lived next door to a yeshiva, and I much preferred the yeshiva-style davening to the standard synagogue service. While I typically wasn't the most fervent *shul*-goer, Yom Kippur was different. I was present when davening started and there when it ended.

I managed to tap into the intensity of the day: the dread of *Kol Nidrei*; the heartfelt pleas of *viduy*; the emotion-packed crescendo of the room exploding at the end of *Neilah*, "*Hashem hu ha-Elokim;*" and the euphoria of the declaration, "*Le-shana ha-ba bi-Yerushalayim*!"

I was very comfortable in my Yom Kippur routine. Year after year, I sat in the same seat, wearing the same Steve Madden (non-leather) slides, using the same *mahzor*, anticipating the tune that was coming next. As I traveled the familiar and yet always emotional journey that is Yom Kippur, I had the full confidence of knowing that I was exactly where I needed to be in that moment, doing what I needed to be doing. I was in *shul*. Because that is what you do on Yom Kippur.

There is a level of *simha* in knowing you are doing the right thing.

Only that's not what I do anymore. I haven't been to *shul* on Yom Kippur in years. And I am okay with that.

Back in my yeshiva-going days, when my brother and I would go back to his house during the short break, my sister-in-law would greet us at the door with a smile. Drained from the hours in *shul*, I could barely muster a smile in return. She, on the other hand, was relaxed and upbeat. And I, still in the intense headspace of *shul*, couldn't relate. To be so "chilled" on Yom Kippur seemed wrong. But now, that is me. And it is kind of nice.

These days, I don't spend hours standing in *shul*, feeling the heaviness of the day, the intensity, the dread. These days, I spend Yom Kippur reading storybooks and playing board games. I try to talk with my kids a little about Yom Kippur, but I end up devoting more time to building elaborate structures out of Magnatiles. When I get tired, I rest and adjudicate

inter-child disputes from the comfort of my couch. I also hang out with the other moms on the block as we have a steady stream of rotating playdates/tag team *davening*. With my friends' and my husband's help, somewhere along the day, I sneak in the five requisite *Shemoneh Esrehs*.

Towards the end of the day, the kids who are still awake daven the end of Neilah along with me. It's not quite as impressive as at the yeshiva, but it still gets a little loud. It may be less inspiring, but it's not just about me. It's about sharing the meaning of the day with my kids.

Not every woman experiences Yom Kippur the same way. Thankfully, most *shul*s have groups, babysitting and families make other arrangements that allow women with young children to be in *shul*, at least part of the day. I hope that the available options continue to increase.

For me, staying at home works and makes the most sense. Sure, there are elements of being at home on Yom Kippur that are challenging. But during the many years I spent the *Yomim Norai'm* single, the primary thing I davened for was to be in this stage of life. While there is certainly much to daven for today, and I could daven more effectively in *shul*, I can't feel upset. My prayers were answered.

While this most definitely is not the Yom Kippur of my single years, this is the reality of my stage of life. So I don't feel guilty for not missing being in *shul*. And I don't feel guilty for being less intense and more relaxed. Instead, I have the full confidence that I am exactly where I need to be in the moment, doing what I need to be doing. And there is *simha* in that too.

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